

# SOWING and REAPING

*The Parables of Jesus*  
*Emil Brunner*

*Translated by Thomas Wieser*



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Saat und Frucht

*The Parables of Jesus*

EMIL BRUNNER

*Translated by Thomas Wieser*

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## PREFACE

I have for many years resisted the repeated requests for the publication of a book of sermons because I felt the distance between the spoken and the printed sermon to be too great. At last I have agreed to try. The main reason is that I must relinquish, for a full year, explaining the Word of God to my dear people of Zürich from the pulpit of the Fraumünster Church. Much as I am convinced with Luther that the true word of the church is the spoken one, I still know that God may also speak through the printed words. I felt at least obliged to have the printed text exactly correspond to the spoken word.

All these sermons about some of the parables of the Kingdom have been preached in the course of the last four years, almost all in a sequence during the past year. I am aware of the fact that none of them really exhausts the text. Rather, I thought it to be my task to hear in all the parables the one theme suggested by the title of this book. With one exception these sermons have so far remained unpublished. May they bear fruit!

Emil Brunner

*Princeton, N. J., October 1938*

## *The Fourfold Soil*

MARK 4:1-20

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

Our text has a strange impact on probably all of us. We un-



derstand the parable—or so it seems—without great difficulty, and the biblical interpretation only clarifies what the parable itself would suggest. But what strikes us as strange, even unintelligible, is the intermediary passage. Here the Lord explains to his disciples why he speaks in parables. Before we are able to interpret the parable itself, we must first try to understand these enigmatic and terrifying words.

Shocking is, first of all, the sharp distinction between those outside and the inner circle of the disciples. We may ask: Is the gospel not addressed to the whole world? Are not all men called to believe? Is the outreach, the mission which penetrates into all the lands of the earth, the evangelization which aims at bringing to all social classes the good news and the new life, not precisely part of the gospel, of the glad tidings, and therefore practiced in the Christian churches at all times? This is certainly so. Jesus himself went from place to place and could not be stopped. He himself tore down the fences which separated the pious flock from the pagan world. The gospel must surely be preached to all nations; perhaps those who do not know it at the present time, as for instance the great peoples of East Asia, will one day be the true bearers of the good news. They at any rate need to hear it as we do. This is not called into question by the Lord when he separates insiders from outsiders.

And yet it remains true: There is a sharp, an unconditional separation between those who are outside and those who are inside. The question now is: Who is outside and who is inside? Great surprises may be in store when God will throw open his books; he himself says that the first will be the last, and the last will be the first. These words about those outside and those inside are certainly not spoken in order to make us feel secure behind our churchly fences, as if we were those inside and the others—the pagans, the godless, the unbelievers—were those outside. Jesus thoroughly shocked and enraged the pious of his time when he showed them that they only appeared to be inside, whereas in reality they were outside! Most certainly this verdict would hold today. He would doubtless judge us Christians of today much more severely than the pagans, for we have known the

gospel from the days of our youth; we know and acknowledge him, the Savior; we read the Scriptures; we pray; yet so little of the true nature of the Kingdom is alive and powerful among us!

Is it not true that we constantly bewail secularism when we read the newspapers? How could we do otherwise in the face of the brimful measure of injustice and inhumanity which is evident in our day! As soon, however, as we begin to reflect more deeply, must we not bewail even more ourselves, the Christians, the church, organized Christianity which for centuries has treasured the gospel and all its gifts and yet has given so little to the world of the new life hidden in the gospel? Time and again I tremble when I think of our church. What a tremendous apparatus of Christian education, groups, meetings, and how preciously little strength and life! Are we truly "in" and the others "out"?

Who is "in"? Those who understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God and—not to be overlooked—who change their ways. For both belong inseparably together in Jesus' eyes. The doing is always the proof of the hearing.

What does it mean to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God? Jesus doubtless refers to his own words; even more, he refers to the presence of God in his person, in his Word, and in his deeds. This is the separation between those outside and those inside: The latter have understood who he is and that God is creating a new life in them, and the former have not. This understanding is totally different from what we may learn through religious instruction, through theological studies or the reading of books.

There are people who excel in the interpretation of the Bible; they can explain the whole catechism much better than many a theologian. This is indeed a most valuable gift. If only we had more of these talented people! But it so happens that these very people often display and transmit nothing of God's Kingdom in their lives. They are able to explain with clarity and conviction the secrets of the Kingdom, but the Kingdom itself has not taken root in their lives. This is the utter misery of the church: not that it is ill-treated in the world, not that it is persecuted or despised by many, but that there exists this frightening discrep-



ancy between the reality of life and the Christian teaching as we know it, the Bible as we read it, the faith as we affirm it. Such an understanding as it is evidenced again and again by the Bible and the church-oriented Christianity of our time and of former times—an understanding which is utterly fruitless for life because it does not bring forth love, kindness, the spirit of sacrifice, justice, and mercy—is not meant here. It falls under the verdict: "That they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand." It falls under the judgment of the word: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Doing is the true measure of understanding. Faith that issues forth in love is the only faith that counts, according to St. Paul.

This understanding separates those inside from those outside. It is a rare event indeed. This is what the parable wishes to establish and to stress. The Lord tells us in this short, yet grave interlude: Even where the Word of God is preached clearly, intelligibly, imaginatively—more intelligibly and imaginatively than any human being has ever done it or will ever do it—even there the understanding is rare which separates those within from those without, the understanding of the secrets of the Kingdom which at the same time participates in the powers of the Kingdom and anticipates the coming reign. True proclamation always causes a sifting. The more clearly the Word of God is preached, the more sharply minds are divided. God himself brings about this decision. Of course God does not want men to harden their hearts and not change their ways—this is a foolish and blasphemous interpretation. God wants to help each and every one to come to the true understanding. But because this is his will, he must call man to his own decision. Man himself must decide. The more clearly the Word of God is preached, the more inescapable is the decision. But now it becomes evident that, quite contrary to the divine purpose, even when God's Word is clearly and powerfully proclaimed, and everyone is indeed forced to make a decision, most people make the wrong one. They say "no" in one form or another. They remain outside, they do not



come in. Perhaps they say "yes," but they do "no," and the doing alone is important, not the saying. Remember the two sons: The first said "yes" and did "no," while the second said "no" and did "yes"; the former was judged and the latter was praised. The doing reveals our decision, no matter how loudly the saying and confessing of words may pretend the contrary. As Christians we must time and again face the terrifying question: Are you one who says "yes" and does "no," or are you truly one who understands the secrets of the Kingdom of God and thus lives in the presence of Jesus Christ?

The parable of the fourfold soil tells us why there are so many more people outside than inside, why, although or precisely because the Word of God has been clearly proclaimed, they decide in their hearts and hence in their lives not for, but against the Kingdom of God, no matter how biblical their verbal confession. Who is the sower and what is the seed he sowed needs no long explanation here. All biblical proclamation has but one focus: God's Word. God wants to be with us in his Word, and we are to be with God in his Word. God wants to give himself to us, to claim us for his own, and we are to give ourselves to God. God seizes our hearts in his Word. God's Word is our true life. This Word of God has come near us in Jesus Christ as it has never before or since. He has proclaimed this Word, he has lived it, but he did so unlike the prophets and the Apostles. He proclaimed it by being the Word himself. This is his secret. In him, God offers himself to man in order to claim man for himself. In Jesus Christ, God approaches humanity so that humanity may approach him, even be together with him, as he truly entered humanity in Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Christ is the sower and the seed; he proclaims God in such a way as to proclaim himself. But he does so in a hidden way, leaving it to man to discover him. Man is to recognize that the Kingdom of God is at hand in him. Whoever recognizes it understands the secrets of the Kingdom. Whoever in Jesus Christ recognizes God's presence, even today, understands the secrets of the Kingdom. Such is the living Kingdom. Such is the living understanding.

We now see that receiving the Word and sowing it are two dif-

ferent matters altogether. The Word is sowed everywhere but received only occasionally. Jesus uses three different examples to show us how the Word is not at all or only superficially received. And only at the very end, as if by way of exception, he tells us how it is truly received and brings forth marvelous fruit. Why is this so? The parable has two things to say. Reception does not depend upon God, neither on the sower nor on the seed; it depends upon man alone. God is not found wanting: He sows the seed everywhere. But the human heart is found wanting in receiving the Word. The fourfold soil is obviously shown to us to make us examine what kind of soil we are and prepare ourselves, by penitence, for true understanding and receiving.

A general remark may be in order here. The four different kinds of soil are not four different kinds of people, but four ways of encountering the Word of God. One and the same person may be now this soil, now that soil, and we may well find all four kinds within ourselves. The purpose of the parable is not to make us hang our heads in shame, saying: I see, I am the kind of man for whom God has no use. True, there are different breeds of cattle, giving more or less milk; there are different sorts of apple trees, producing either small or large fruits. And there are such differences in man, too. Nevertheless the message of the parable is this: No one is conditioned to a set response to God's Word. Each one could be the good soil. God does not throw his seed on soil where it is lost without repair. The seed could come to fruition everywhere. You are not the rocky ground, the thorny field or the trodden path; you become the one or the other, depending on your reaction to God's Word. Soil is what it is, but man, in the eyes of God, is capable of deciding for himself, is called to decide for himself. The fourfold field denotes not four different human dispositions, but four different human decisions, all of which are latent in us.

We may say: The trampled-down path—this is not what I am. Or else I would not go to church. This applies to those who cannot be reached by preaching, because they obstruct their ears and harden their hearts. Let us not be deceived! Many look soft-hearted and consider themselves as such, yet at the core they are as hard as stone and defy any approach. They know deep down



how to hide and escape from the Word of God. The soldiers among us know that nothing equals sand to hold up a bullet. Sand gives in, yet in so doing, it resists all the more. Is yours a heart of sand, seemingly receptive but in reality hard and impenetrable? How can we know? God's Word is correlated to your dealings with your neighbor. You relate to your neighbor as you relate to God's Word. Can your neighbor really get close to you? Or do you harbor ultimate reservations about him? Is there a blank wall within you which keeps him at a distance? The Word of God may penetrate the mind and men are deceived, but it does not necessarily enter into the heart. Do you let it approach you up to a certain point and then exclaim: Stop! Is yours a heart of sand? Our text specifies that Satan immediately comes and takes away the Word. Satan is present whenever we harden ourselves against God. The evil one is especially concerned with the hardening of the heart.

The second and third possibilities are very real to us, and we easily recognize our own image in the rocky soil and among the thorns. Once upon a time we all received the Word with joy. We were perhaps even enthusiastic about it. A church service may have been a great emotional experience. But beware: Enthusiasm about a sermon is an almost sure sign that something is wrong either with the preacher or with the listener or with both. God's Word does not stir up enthusiasm. It kills and makes alive, it calls to battle and promises victory, but at the same time it implies a costly and difficult struggle. Only those who are ignorant of this may be enthusiastic. Enthusiasm has its place in a concert hall, but not in the house of God. Enthusiasm exists as long as the heart is not really hit, as long as only our imagination and emotions are incited. He who is hit by the Word of God becomes sober. His illusions are taken away from him, the illusions about himself as well as those about the world. God's Word tells you that you are an offender of his law, a rebel who deserves the death penalty, a lost one for whom Jesus Christ had to die. How I wish someone would announce God's Word to me in such a way that I could weep over my unfaithfulness toward my Lord, that I would be ashamed at the bottom of my heart of my disobedience



and my lack of faith, that God would seize me with an iron fist and not let go anymore! How seldom do I allow the Word of God to take possession of me!

Our text has this to say about the enthusiastic people: They are impulsive, living only for the present and falling away at the sight of the slightest tribulation. It need not be as much as persecution; a mere offense, a disappointment, the resistance we meet in our jobs or at home—and gone is the enthusiasm about God's Word, gone the peace of mind. Does it not often take shamefully little to throw us off course, to have God's Word dismissed from our hearts? A tree's resilience in a storm depends upon the depth of its roots. The power of God's Word in us depends on the depth of its roots in our hearts. Is your whole person bound to God's Word? Do you allow God to be the Lord of all your vital relationships?

The third example is most easily understood. The Word falls among thorns which grow up with the good seed. The cares of the world, the delight in riches, and the desire for other things choke the Word. We all know this from our own experience. (I am even tempted to say from daily experience.) In the morning we thrust ourselves upon God in prayer—we do this, don't we, every day, as a matter of fact? We have accepted his Word, received the day from his hands, and asked for his guidance. And so we enter the day. But in one short hour our conversation with God has fallen prey to the business at hand, the difficulties with our fellowmen, and our own plans. And the more the day advances, the more we digress from God's Word and God's way. A passion, an overwhelming ambition, intrude in our life. A plan we pursue may have possessive power over us, making us servile. Or the cares and anxieties of daily living crush the Word of God in our hearts.

Why is this so? Because, unlike the knowledgeable and experienced farmer, we let the thorns in us grow as they please instead of plucking them out. We cannot do away with daily living, its work, its tasks, its problems. But we can plant the Word of God into our daily life and its concerns in such a way that it becomes the determining factor. This makes the difference be-

tween a true and a phony Christian life: whether you yearn all day long for the Word of God or whether you don't.

And, lastly, there is the good soil which brings forth much fruit. "Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" Of the same ones it is said: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only . . ." To do God's Word means not primarily to keep his laws; rather, it means to take his Word into our daily life and to submit all our doing and thinking, our plans and ambitions, to God's will and Word. The Word of God is actually Jesus Christ himself, the living and present Lord. Where he is present in our daily life, where we live with him and from him, where we do not run away from him or turn our backs on him, but rather seek him again and again, as a child seeks his mother's hand, where we unceasingly think of what God in his Holy Scriptures and through his Spirit tells us today—there is the good soil.

Such a man is given a great promise: He will bear fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. Few as these people are, their fruit is manifold. We may even say that everything they do is a fruit of their communion with Christ—the great and the small, the private and the public, action, conversation, or thought—everything bears the marks of the Kingdom, a special impact of the Giver of life. To live in the Word of God—this is the secret of true life. For we are created in and for the Word. If we choose to live without it, humanity and human nature wither. If we live in it, they blossom like a tree which grows in good soil. It is one and the same to say "to live in God's Word" or "to have God's Word in our hearts." We live from what we have in our hearts. Our life grows from where we have our roots, as the shaft and the grain grow from the seed. The true fruit of God's Word is again God's Word, as the fruit of the grain is again the grain.

Whoever lives in God's Word must spread it to others. He is counted with those who understand the secrets of the Kingdom.

Let us therefore take to heart this Word of God, examine ourselves in its light, bend our will under its power, ask God to help us grow into doers of his Word who exhibit the nature of the Kingdom. Amen.

## *The Pharisee and the Publican*

LUKE 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This parable is so marvelously clear and simple that it needs almost no explanation. No unintelligible words, no thought that requires a special context to reveal its meaning. We might well go home and ponder these words in our hearts so that they sink down and take roots in the depth of our being, where our will-power, love, and hatred originate. For the Word of God is entrusted to us, not that we may understand it, but that it may create us anew, not that we may know and believe it, but that we are confronted with God and his reality and thus may be renewed. Knowing the entire Bible by heart, and understanding it so well that you can explain every single verse, is of little use to you, unless the biblical Word penetrate your innermost being, as the rain penetrates the tiniest roots of a tree in order to rise and to fill the whole tree and to bring forth leaves and fruit. My dear friends, how often do we fall into this very error when we read the Scriptures! We grasp what we read with our minds alone and then let it pass as hard soil lets pass a light rain. Let us therefore employ this hour not to explain the text—it needs no explanation—but to grasp it and use it as did the woman in the



parable of our Lord who took a leaven and worked it into the dough until it was completely leavened. We will ask God to work this Word into our hearts, into our lives, until they are all filled with it.

Two people are shown to us in this parable. Both do the same thing: They pray. They are praying in the temple, a place particularly suited for prayer. There is a well-known proverb saying, "When two do the same thing, it is not the same thing after all." Indeed, what these two men are doing is not the same thing, although for quite different reasons than the proverb suggests. The saying implies the existence of different kinds of people. What a gentleman does is essentially different from what a rude and common man does, precisely because it is done either in a gentleman's way or in a rude and common manner. This is certainly true as far as worldly truth goes and has therefore only worldly validity. Before God all things are reversed. For according to the proverb, the Pharisee would doubtlessly reap the reward.

The name of "Pharisee" has bad connotations for us. But in Jesus' time this was not so. The Pharisees were the pious people, the churchgoers, reliable and hardworking. In order to accomplish something one had to turn to the Pharisees. If money were to be raised for a good cause, the co-operation of the Pharisees was indispensable, although they were by no means the most successful group. Truly, they did their share. Piety was costly to them. And what is more, they exhibited great zeal for the divine cause. Not only did they regularly attend divine services; they also went to Bible studies, they read the Scriptures, they believed every single word of the Book, they knew how to appreciate the Word of God and were not ashamed of it. They dared talking about it. And this is not everything. They were desirous to communicate what they had received. They did not keep the gift to themselves. They were, as Jesus testifies himself, busy missionaries, or, as we are wont to say today, they changed lives. They went from place to place, from land to land, in order to spread to all nations the piety given to them and valued as their most precious treasure. They ably talked about their conversion experience, how they had lived earlier and how things had changed

since. They did not spare any effort to bring about changes in the whole Jewish land. This is why they commanded respect. People said by themselves, "Religion is everyone's own business. As for me, I don't care much about it. But let's be frank. If I were to become a religious person, I would become a Pharisee. They at least take religion seriously, they work hard at it, they are persistent and are not trapped by compromise. If all were like them in our Jewish land, things would be different in our families, in business, in politics. Ours would be a land under God's rule, and God's will would be obeyed."

Such a man was the Pharisee who prayed in the temple. According to the proverb, we would expect his prayer to be much more effective than the one offered by a chance visitor to the temple, a Sunday prayer so to speak. The Pharisees truly knew how to pray. They were trained in it, they applied themselves to the art of prayer. Not content to pray occasionally in the temple, as other mortals do, they went there every day, even seven times a day. Some of them rose to pray from their sleep, at midnight. They practiced the discipline of prayer. It was not left to chance, mood, or whim. There was order in their prayers, as there was order in everything they did. We recognize a man of prayer, steeped in Scriptures, experienced in the things of the Spirit, insofar as he begins his prayer with thanksgiving: "God, I thank thee." Only the inexperienced begin with their own petitions. A true man of prayer gives thanks before he petitions. There is no room for doubt that the Pharisee took his prayer seriously. As a matter of fact, the Pharisees were deadly serious about their affairs. Just remember that Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee and not once after his conversion did he question the earnest of his Pharisee piety. Nor should we contest the veracity of the things the Pharisee mentions in his prayer. Indeed he accomplishes what he professes, and this is no small achievement. I should like to see how many among us are willing to pay such a price for their faith. When two do the same thing, it is not the same thing after all: The prayer of such a Pharisee, such a seasoned, pious man, is entirely different from the prayer of a publican, of one who perhaps has not prayed for years.



A publican, or tax collector, is the very opposite of a pious man. He lives from unsavory dealings, and knows that his dealings are unsavory. He also knows that he thereby excludes himself from God's people. He cherishes money far above the will of God. He is money-conscious, a materialist who is not stopped by any scruples in his reckless undertakings, detrimental to society and therefore, by bourgeois standards, rightfully outcast. His is an underworld existence. He is a dubious character in the eyes of the good people. There is nothing praiseworthy about him. For this reason the name of the tax collector is cursed, the person of the tax collector is the horrifying example of what one is not supposed to be, his behavior the prime example of what one is not supposed to do. The tax collector is named in one breath with the whore who sells her body for money's sake. The lives of both fall under the verdict: without scruples, without God. If the proverb be true, a tax collector's prayer is of little value. What can he pray for? He has forfeited his place within the community of the pious. He has betrayed God and sold eternal life to the devil for earthly riches. How dare he pray!

This is the picture as human beings see it. But God views it differently. For he looks at the heart. Before him there are no Pharisees and no tax collectors, no good or bad characters, no set personalities. God looks at the heart; he sees but one little spot, hidden to the eyes of man, defying demonstration. And this little spot determines whether prayer is real or whether it is not. My dear friends, let us not deceive ourselves by the wording of the two prayers, thinking: If we had heard the prayer of the Pharisee, we, too, would have detected its hypocrisy; and if we had heard the tax collector's prayer, we would have found it to be true and genuine. What our Lord says is subtler. Whether the Pharisee really prayed as Jesus said he did is not so important; neither is whether the tax collector prayed as Jesus said he did. All that counts in either case is the invisible little spot, the innermost heart. The Pharisee's prayer was perhaps different from the wording suggested by the text; maybe he prayed humbly and lovingly. But God sees and hears through everything into the very heart—and here lies the center of decision.



True, we easily agree that we are not to pray as the Pharisee did. Two things are wrong with his prayer: First, he exhibits before God what is good and praiseworthy in himself; he extols his good deeds. Secondly—and this is closely related—he despises and judges the fellowman staying behind him and whom he immediately spots for what he really is. After pride, lack of love. Both belong together, so much so that we may say they are one and the same thing. We quite naturally approve of Jesus' verdict on the two prayers: One is worthless, the other is authentic. We agree with our Lord without the slightest difficulty or afterthought. But only because we overlook that he hints at the little spot behind the prayer, not at the prayer itself. For as soon as we reflect on the little spot, the heart, the innermost feelings and thoughts and willpower, the verdict on the Pharisee is turned on ourselves.

I must frankly admit to be myself again and again that Pharisee. I am, of course, fully aware of the hypocrisy of his prayer, and perhaps I do not pray likewise as far as words are concerned. However, if God considers my heart, he sees ever so often the heart of a Pharisee, of one who is proud of his goodness and righteousness, who, although he knows how very wrong and hateful this is, is lulled by the assurance that after all he is counted among those who read their Bibles, pray, consort not with the ungodly but with the pious, take neither mammon nor anything worldly for their god. Among those who hold the true faith, free from errors, who have biblical insight and not a man-made belief. I boast in acknowledging Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and thus in being a member of his body. Yes, the human heart is truly inventive: I boast in not being a Pharisee like one or the other of my acquaintances. Yet at the very moment of boasting I am the Pharisee with his prayer: "I thank thee, God, that I am not like other men." At this very moment, I haughtily exalt myself above my brother.

Dear friends, it makes no difference whether we are Christian Pharisees or Jewish Pharisees, whether we are proud not to be liberal or orthodox, not to be members of a sect or Sunday Christians, not to be money-makers or pleasure-seekers, power-conscious or spiritual aristocrats. Whenever we stand before God

with full hands, we are Pharisees, even though what we carry may be the best there is in the world, the Bible itself, the Word of God, faith, the new life in faith. God looks for the little spot alone, hidden behind our confession of faith, behind our behavior, behind our character, in short behind everything that exists in itself and hence is somehow visible. God sees what is ultimately hidden, even hidden to myself. Even though I may not be aware at any given moment of resembling the Pharisee, I still may resemble him and can only pray: O God, help my cursed pride and my cursed lack of love, my self-esteem and my judging of others.

As there are before God no pious people whom he would respect as such because he only sees the little spot, there are no tax collectors either. Perhaps the tax collector did not actually pray what Jesus portends him to say, but uttered some quite awkward or seemingly insignificant phrases. But God again looks only at the heart. And now he tells us that it may well happen that even a tax collector prays rightly because it dawns in his heart: I am a worthless sinner, I have nothing to show to God. Should we now think: Indeed there is no good in you; it's about time you acknowledge as much, old sinner; finally you come around to realize what we have been telling you all along. If this is our attitude, the roles are changed; we are the godless, and he alone is the true believer.

Does this imply that we are continually to come before God with this prayer on our lips: "God, be merciful to me a sinner"? Yes, this is implied. Even more. Only in this humility do we actually stand before God in prayer. You see, to stand before God is a great mystery. It is not enough to say the words of prayer. We stand before God at the very moment when the thought strikes us: I am a sinner; God have mercy on me! And as soon as this thought, this insight, vanishes from our hearts, do we vanish from the presence of God, even though we may go on praying for hours.

But, we ask, how can we stand before God as sinners? Is it possible to live with the haunting thought of our sinful nature? You are quite right, dear friends, we cannot live exclusively with this thought in mind, nor stand in God's presence. The most important fact about this parable, as of all others, is not men-



tioned. The most important part is he who tells the story. He who says: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other." He says so to you; he alone may say so. He who forgives sins, who gave his life for many, who, as you stand before God as a sinner not knowing any longer how to go on living, lays his hands upon you, saying: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."

One question still begs an answer. It inevitably arises when we hear this message. Does it make no difference, we anxiously ask, whether we live a pious life or live as tax collectors or prostitutes? Whether we try hard to do God's will, whether we aim at keeping under control our thoughts and emotions, our imagination, our tongues, and, above all, our prayers? If the end result is the same, if we are all sinners, what is the use of trying? When the Lord said, "Your sins are forgiven," he added, "Go in peace and sin no more." The very root of all sin is pride and the subsequent lack of love. This root needs to be plucked out time and again. This is done only when we acknowledge and confess ourselves to be sinners before God. Once the power of pride and lack of love is broken, the way is open for the casting out of other sins and for good works. Only those who daily live from God's forgiveness may do his will. And those who partake in this forgiveness must do his will, unconditionally, with all their strength. Such is not the teaching of the Lord in this parable, but in others. It is not true that it makes no difference how we live, since we are all sinners. We cannot experience forgiveness if we believe this. To experience it, we abandon this thought.

All we have heard about the Pharisee is right. We are to do all the good works, knowing nevertheless, whenever we enter the presence of God, that we have nothing to show forth. I remain but a poor sinner, regardless of my efforts. If you do not like the idea, you prove to be stubborn, rebellious and proud, unwilling to be humbled. As such you have no communion with God.

Let us therefore, dear friends, pay heed to God's Word and take it to heart. God resists the proud, but he has mercy upon the humble. He who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted. Amen.

# 3

## *Two Parables About the Kingdom of God*

MARK 4:26-29; MATTHEW 13:45-46

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

The Bible has but one theme, the Kingdom of God or, more precisely, God's kingly reign. "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." God's will is not done because we human beings obscure God's truth by our unrighteousness. From this one great evil all lesser evils grow. Because of this predicament, this perversion, we stand in need of salvation. And again, salvation is wrought only when God's will is done, when he, the rightful King, reigns. Only then our predicament, all perversion, and evil will be overcome. This Kingdom of God, this royal reign, is the focal point of everything in Scripture. Because of this goal, life has meaning; without it, life would not only change its meaning, it would not have any meaning at all. God's Kingdom is the only meaning which is not meaningless, the only goal which is not merely a passing stage, the final and unconditionally valid event. Whatever does not serve this goal is but loss and guilt. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." The two parables which we just read explain how the coming of the Kingdom is realized. They interpret it in two quite different, if not seemingly contradictory, ways. But since Jesus himself told these parables, the contradiction must be only ap-



parent. And since he told them both, it is necessary to hear them both. Having listened to the two stories, we may grasp the total significance of the coming of God's Kingdom. Let us therefore pay heed to both parables, to each one for itself, and ask God to open our ears that we may comprehend the apparent contradiction as a unity. This will be possible only when we listen with our whole being, with our hearts as well as our minds. Such hearing and listening is bound to lead to obedience and personal involvement.

First we hear about a sower, his seed and his field. But unlike the parable of the sower where the variety of the soil and the corresponding growth of the seed is stressed, this story has only one message: The seed, once scattered upon the ground, creates something new of itself. It grows without outside interference. The theme of the parable is the mysterious power of God's Word.

It is truly a miracle how the seed sprouts and produces first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. No science has so far been capable of explaining the mystery. No science will ever explain it, for it is the mystery of life itself. In this mystery we get an inkling of God's miraculous power. How mysteriously wise and how mysteriously powerful is the Spirit and the will of God the Creator! However, the miracle of the self-growing seed does not inform us of the Spirit's thoughts and the will's demands with regard to us. Admiring this miracle of nature is therefore of no great help to man. It remains for us a marvelous spectacle, yet lacking the power to transform our lives. It does not bear fruit in our lives. It does not heal us, nor does it make better people of us. It is incapable of removing the poison that has seeped into our existence to devastate it. But these changes are precisely what we are looking for, aren't they? We seek out God because we cannot handle our life. Where is God, where is he at work, the Renewer and Redeemer of our life?

This God and Savior comes to us in his Word. He is no other than the Creator, although our blinded eyes fail to recognize him in his creation. Coming to us in his Word, he accomplishes three things: He shows us the true creation; he shows us our fall

from this creation; and he shows us the renewal of creation. In so doing, he has already started the process of renewal, renewal through his Word. Such is the miraculous power of his Word. For unlike our own words, his Word is not offered lightly, thrown to the wind. We utter a word, or a thousand words for that matter, as easily as we breathe. His Word, however, mounts like fire from the depth of his heart, as burning lava erupts from the depths of the earth. O unfathomable mystery! His Word is his Son, the mystery of his divine nature, person, and Spirit from all eternity. His Word is creative power, changing and transforming our lives. God himself comes to us in his Word—he, the true Creator and Redeemer.

We human beings are too much blinded by material things to be able to comprehend of ourselves the nature and power of God's Word. Along with Faust, we say: I cannot possibly esteem the Word this highly. The Word is not real enough for us. Electricity or steam, dynamite or big masses—by these things we are impressed. We believe in visible power, in physical force. We have lost sight of the fact that what we call physical force is but the reflection of God's power, brought forth and sustained by the power of his Word. All that exists through his Word, his will, his thought. The primary reality is neither iron nor stone, but the Spirit and the Word of God. We ourselves are created by this Word—not only created by it, but also in it and for it. In this we are human beings. Man is the only creature capable of receiving and understanding the Word, even receiving and understanding God's Word. We would be true human beings if we lived entirely in God's Word. In reality we are miserable offenders because we have shut ourselves off from the Word, and now we are no longer open to it. Having lost the Word of God, we have lost our God-created human nature as well. This is the origin of our human predicament. This is why we do not understand each other any longer, why our hearts are possessed by greed, why our imagination is infested, why our thinking is permeated by lies and selfishness. This is why we cannot improve our lot, despite all our efforts, neither by laws nor by personal reform, neither by education nor by culture. The poison at work in the



life of all of us has spread everywhere. The poison has entered because the Word of God has left.

Salvation in turn is nothing else but God's Word taking again possession of us. Where this occurs, the poison is thrown out and life becomes human again as it was intended to be in creation. There God's will rules, there is his Kingdom. This is at stake in our parable: God comes to us in his Word, his miraculous, creative, and redemptive Word. Where this Word penetrates, there is renewal. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." How could it be otherwise?

Where God's Word enters man's heart, there also enters the divine will and intention. God's will and intention has but one meaning: love. Where God reigns, love reigns. And where love reigns, life becomes human, whole, joyful. Self-centeredness yields to love of neighbor. Loneliness is overcome by fellowship. Anxiety gives way to confidence. The bad conscience ceases to exist. God's Word of love and forgiveness obstructs the poisonous fountain and makes flow the waters of childlike love of God. Is this exclusively the work of God's Word, of nobody else, of nothing else? It is indeed the work of the Word alone.

The parable, however, has more to say. This wondrous working takes time, we are told. It is not accomplished all at once. Rather, it begins unobtrusively, hidden to the eyes of man. No one knows when the Word of God enters the heart of a fellowman. The fellowman himself is perhaps unaware at first. But soon enough the Word is mightily at work in him. The seed pushes and grows. And this inner process is accompanied by outward, visible signs. When God's Word is active in a man's heart, others will sooner or later notice it. The new life manifests itself toward others in a new humanity. Love, we may say, is faith made visible. Faith is the hidden root, love the visible blade and the ear. Here, as with all other living organisms, multiplication is the proof of fertility. The ear itself is now full of seeds. What is received must be transmitted. The power of the new life is manifest when it spreads and reaches out to others. How does this happen? In no other way than through our spreading the Word, the seed we received

and which created and awakened the new life in us. It takes place without any interference, as the entire process of growth, according to our text, occurs "of itself."

So the Kingdom of God grows not only in one human heart; it gains others as well—always thanks to the wondrously creative Word of God.

This is one side of the picture. It shows God creating new life through his Word. He alone, nobody else, nothing else. Now is the time to ask how God creates through his Word. Obviously his creative activity differs from that of nature. When God created the sun or the earth or the Milky Way or the atmosphere, there was no ear to receive the Creator's Word. Earth did not emerge from nothingness at God's call in the same way a child comes forth from his hiding place at the father's begging. Man is the only creature to whom God's Word is made known. He alone is created to understand, believe, and obey it. God does not treat man as a blacksmith treats iron, heating and hammering until it yields the form he intended. God speaks to us and we must respond. When God, through the prophets or through Jesus Christ, wishes to communicate his Word, he does not cram it into our minds and hearts. Rather, he appeals to us, he courts us, he calls us, he challenges us, he begs us. In so doing, he confirms what is said about the creation of man: We are created not only through the Word, but for the Word. God's Word is not preached to animals—St. Anthony's sermon to the fish is pious fantasy—it is preached only to man. It does not overpower us the way a hurricane does, but approaches us gently, requesting faith and obedience. Thus we read: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

God's Word takes possession of us by making us decide for or against it. This second affirmation is as strongly emphasized in Scriptures as is the first. This is not a new theme. There is but one theme, the Kingdom of God, his reign. But in order to explain how the Kingdom comes, how the Word enters a man's heart as the new master, it is necessary now to stress the other



aspect: man's decision. This is the purpose of the second parable, the parable of the merchant and his pearl.

This parable also opens with the all-decisive declaration: "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Its content is therefore not less important, it is not subordinate or incidental. Our Lord Jesus never speaks of incidental matters. What he says in the parable of the merchant and the pearl is as essential as what he says in the parable of the self-growing seed. The former deals with the coming of the Kingdom in the Word, the latter with the winning of the Kingdom through personal decision. We are the merchant. We all are searching for precious pearls. We all are searching for what gives value, meaning, and content to our lives. We all hoard possessions such as external or material wealth, education and culture, social position and status. The search for such values determines our whole life up to the point when we catch sight of the pearl, when God and his Kingdom enter our vision. We have just heard how this happens. The Word is proclaimed to us, a Bible gets by chance into our hands, or a friend—God's Word is perhaps working in him—tells us about the Kingdom.

Now we get a glimpse of the pearl. We immediately notice that it is larger and more precious than all other pearls found earlier. The Kingdom of God is a more valuable treasure than anything we can imagine. Whatever we may picture falls short of the promise contained in God's Word. It is unquestionably the largest pearl, beyond comparison. But . . .

There can be no "but," we should think. If you are offered this pearl, how can you but take hold of it? Reality shows that this is not so. "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." He invited them to the great banquet, but they had themselves excused and did not come. They all saw the fine pearl, but they did not acquire it. Why not? Who could refuse to get hold of the greatest treasure with joy? Our parable has the answer to such questioning. The pearl bears a price tag, and it is outrageous. From a rational, human point of view, buying it is much too risky a business. To imitate the tone of the parable, it is really a most foolish speculation. For one must put all eggs in this one basket. This explains why so many are content with window-shopping, why they decline the invitation to the great

banquet and have themselves excused with regret. "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life . . ." "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself . . . and follow me," follow blindly, like Abraham leaving his homeland in search of an unknown country; like the same Abraham, father of the faith, offering his son with whom rested all his hope, without knowing how he could be replaced. To believe and to trust him who says: I shall give you everything when you abandon everything—this is the purchase price. Its name is blind faith and blind obedience.

In this way and no other, the Word of God approaches us. Thus Jesus, the Word of God in person, approached Peter, the fisherman, calling, "Follow me!" And Peter left his nets and followed him. For this reason he, the first disciple, became the cornerstone of the church of Christ.

Why do we hesitate to imitate this merchant or Peter the disciple? Because we are afraid and unwilling to pay the price. Perhaps both are one and the same: the greed with which we cling to what we should let go, and the fear of letting go. Fear tells us that things might take a turn for the worse. A sparrow in one's hand is better than a pigeon on the rooftop. I am sure of what I possess, but I am not so sure of what I shall receive upon letting go what I have. It is the same lack of faith, the same doubt in God's Word, which suggested to Adam in Paradise the necessity to fend for himself since, after all, God's promise was not quite sure. The second hindrance is greed. We press so hard what we have in our hands that we are unable to let go. This compulsive greed is but the consequence of our lack of faith. What is it we must let go? What do we have to sell in order to buy the pearl? Again, we are told, everything. But what does this mean? Does it imply that you must abandon your job, sell your house, give up your belongings, your education, all your secular interests? I refrain from the oversimplified answer that it is not necessary to renounce all these things since God wants only your heart. This is foul talk about the human heart. It suits us too well to be true. In the Bible the innermost is never separated from the external. He who offers his heart and life to God must give up many material things. To decide for Christ has visible consequences if it is genuine, not pretense or verbal assent.



Rightly understood, however, it remains true that the pearl costs nothing but your heart, your person, yourself. You must let go of yourself, you must cease to be your own master and allow God to be your Lord. Cease to justify yourself and ascribe righteousness to God alone. Cease to take yourself seriously in order to take seriously God alone. Cease to keep anything for yourself if you know that it is displeasing to God. This is what it means to believe and to obey, to receive God's Word. This is what it means to sell everything in order to acquire the pearl. Is this all? He who so asks has yet to learn what it means to let go of oneself. The Apostles gave a stupendous name to this letting go of oneself. They called it death. To die with Christ, to acknowledge his cross as my judgment, my condemnation, yet at the same time to accept his resurrection as my new life. He who truly lets go of himself, who dies with Christ, is ready to let go of the things God may require—riches, dignity, life, health, prestige, or whatever he had set his heart upon.

We now understand the Word of the Lord: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it."

In this manner God's Word takes possession of us. We are not passively involved, like people awaiting their death. On the contrary, we are challenged to the most audacious, most difficult and undivided commitment, to the highest endeavor. It consists in saying "no" to ourselves, to our capabilities, so that we expect nothing from ourselves and everything from God, that we no longer act by ourselves but let God act within us and through us as he pleases. This would be suicide, were it not for the knowledge that only then do we gain our life, our freedom, our true self. God in his Word, in his Son, wants to take possession of you, to call you his very own. Will you or will you not let this come to pass? This is the decisive question.

The way to the Kingdom of God inescapably passes through this "yes, I will." God's reign is realized in your life only with your consent. God does not force anyone. He wants to reign over us in such a way as to make us, his servants, truly free men. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Nobody else. The Kingdom of God is established in this freedom. Amen.

## *The Parable of the Two Sons*

LUKE 15:11-32

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said



to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

This story is ordinarily called the parable of the prodigal son. This is somewhat misleading; the correct title should read: the parable of the two sons. For what we learn about the elder son is not merely an appendix, perhaps even an unfitting addition to the story of the prodigal one. Rather, the comparison of the two brothers is the true content of the parable and the conclusion is its very climax. This is already evident from the introductory remarks to the three parables in this fifteenth chapter: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' " The murmuring of the pious crowd over Jesus' way of dealing with the godless was the reason for his telling the parables. He wants to point out how unjustified such murmuring is. This is why the story of the elder son who complains about the fatherly welcome of the younger brother is as important as the story of the prodigal son itself.

Something else becomes clear when we read the introduction. Very often the following conclusion is drawn from the parable: It proves, so they say, the forgiveness of sins without a special act of atonement, without the death of Jesus on the cross. As if the teaching of the redemptive power of Jesus' death were in contradiction with Jesus' own teaching! This is a complete misunderstanding. The Lord Jesus relates all three parables in order to justify his own work. He does not propose a general teaching on repentance and forgiveness independent from his person, as Socrates or other wise men taught doctrines that had nothing to do with their lives. On the contrary, Jesus in his parables comments and explains his actions. Above all, he points to the identity of God's work and his own, his way of dealing with the outcast, as if to say: You see, this is how God acts. What I do does not happen out of context. The opposite is true: In me, in my love for the godless, God himself is at work. My love is God's love, my forgiveness God's forgiveness. My acceptance of those whom

the pious reject is God's own acceptance. Hence the parable, without explicitly mentioning him, is concerned with Jesus. Not with his death—how could he foretell it? No one would understand—but with God's love as it is manifest in Jesus' love and offered through him to mankind. In this context we must hear the parable, lest we misunderstand it completely.

A third remark needs to be added. When we speak about the two sons, we speak in each case of ourselves. True, the parable mentions two different people, the younger brother who went away and the elder one who stayed home. But as we meditate on this parable, we are both; now we resemble more the one son, now more the other. Characteristically, the parables of the Lord often present, as different people, what essentially are but aspects of one and the same person. We are both the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable told in the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Likewise we are the fourfold soil in the parable of the sower. And again we are the foolish and the wise maidens or, at least, we are inclined to be both at one and the same time. Let us therefore examine ourselves in the light of this parable.

The story begins with a rich father whose younger son asked for his share of the property. This is the story of my life and of yours. It begins with the Father whose children and creatures, indeed whose beloved sons, destined to be heirs of the Father's riches, we are, you and I. God has created each of us in his own image; he has marked us with the seal of his own nature; he has destined us to life with him, to fellowship with him, to life eternal. God the Father and Creator is not only first before all worlds; he is also first before you, in your own life. For in him, in his thought and will, your life takes its origin and beginning. We all come from God. The stuff we are made of is taken from the earth, from father and mother, from forefathers and forebearers, from this visible world. Yet at the same time each individual is essentially a creature of God. God certainly uses natural causes and earthly material in the creation of man, in the way a sculptor uses the marble from the quarry and hammer and chisel. And yet the work of art originates in his mind, and his mind creates it.



Likewise God creates according to his will. His design for us, the Scriptures tell us, is that we be his sons, his heirs. The Lord himself affirms this purpose for us in his parable. And does not each human being somehow sense that he is born for a higher purpose than the animals and all other creatures? We all have some notion of nobility which is derived from our divine destiny. Such is the beginning, the primary origin of human life.

There is, however, still another beginning. It is of a secondary, subsequent kind and entirely different from the first. It consists of a rupture, of a separation. This, too, is the beginning of every human existence. As far back as we can remember our past, the separation is there as a fact and also as a continuing event. We might say it is a wrong note that rings through our whole life, the endlessly repeated story of our breaking away from God as we already broke away from him in the very beginning. Both the creation and the alienation are mysteries for us. We cannot grasp or unveil them, but nonetheless we know them to be true. Estrangement is not a theory; it is an undeniable fact.

What is the nature of this alienation? We want to stand on our own feet. We do not want to be dependent on the Father anymore. We want to be the masters of our own destiny; we want to organize our lives as we please. We call this freedom. Now the word is spelled out, the great and dangerous word of freedom which so often turns out to be a trap. Don't misunderstand me: I am not saying that freedom is not precious or necessary. My question is only: freedom from what? Freedom for what? Free from prejudice, free from compulsion, free from other people—marvelous! But free from God—this is the primary lie, the fountain of all evil. It is the primary sin because we continue to live solely on what God gives us. It is the fountain of all evil since all other sin and our human predicament stem from this freedom from God. This is the point in the next part of the parable.

At first this freedom seems to be a success. Free from God, we are our own masters. As our own masters we may do as we please. And what is there more thrilling than to do as we like, to live it up! For many people this is the highest goal. A secret longing for such unlimited freedom burns in all of us and leads

us astray again and again. We all say at times: I have my heart set on this, I simply must have it. My will be done, I am my own lord and master. Such obstinacy, such egotism, stirs in the heart of each of us, and it is the root of all sin. Selfishness, self-love, although perhaps in noble disguise as self-fulfillment in charitable activities, in giving, in reaching out for the higher things in life, even in piety and prayer—this is the breaking away from God, the exodus from the Father's home into the far country. It is the beginning of our human predicament; we might well say: the beginning of the end. For death is the wages of sin. And death begins with estrangement from God who is life.

This death, this alienation, is most drastically pictured in the parable of the prodigal son. First, there is inner disintegration, then outer misery, and finally total ruin, the abyss.

Whose story is this? It is first and foremost our story, yours and mine. But, we may contend, we never went to the bitter end. Let us not forget that the outward misery to which the younger brother is exposed is but a sign of the inward chaos in which man without the benefits of Christ's redemption is trapped. It is the human predicament of alienation from God. Each one of us—as far as our own efforts are concerned—lives in this predicament, even though we may do fairly well, remain or become quite decent people, and be scarcely aware of our true situation. Actually we perceive it only when we come to ourselves, when the great transformation is about to set in.

Furthermore, this is not only our story, yours and mine, but the story of all mankind. Humanity as a whole went the way of the younger son. In our time the human predicament becomes evident to everyone. We live at a moment of history where alienation from God is the order of the day, so to say. As a result, we see more clearly than ever before in history where such estrangement from God leads. Where the bonds with God are broken, mankind dissolves into chaos. Where man ostentatiously and consciously endeavors to be his own god, the predicament of life far from God is all the more dreadful, as we witness today.

This predicament, however, is not the central theme of our parable. Sin is never the main theme in the Bible, but rather



God's forgiveness and redemption. When the son turned away from the father, the father did not repudiate the son. He hopes and waits for his return. He is ready to pardon; he even goes out to meet him. The father's heart is neither cold nor embittered. This is what Jesus proclaims in his words and by his deeds. To show us this inalienable love of the Father has been the purpose of his coming into the world. He himself is the Word of God's forgiving love for you and for me, for all mankind. In the parable of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, Jesus shows us God who in him, the Good Shepherd, goes after estranged humanity. In the parable of the prodigal son, he shows us that this love is in store for whoever is prepared to return. Threefold is the meaning of the son's return in our story. First, God cannot show his love for you unless you come to yourself. You must be at the very end of your journey, must have exhausted your last possibilities and your last wisdom, before you may experience what God's love is like. We cannot encounter God as long as we keep climbing, but only when we step down, deep down, where nothing is left of us. Second, the turning point is not reached by a mere bemoaning of our sins, a vague feeling of despair and worthlessness. It is marked by true repentance and conversion. "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you . . .'" He who thinks he has a right to God's love, because he is God's son, will not obtain it. Third, the return must occur without the slightest thought of heavenly rewards. The son's only desire is to be with the father, even as one of his hired servants. He does not envisage a divine inheritance. He only wants to repair the separation, to live again in his father's house.

The most important message of the whole story is God's unbelievable love. Not a word of reproach, not one question. As soon as he catches sight of the son, the father runs to meet him, embraces him and kisses him. His first words are, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet . . ." My dear friends, we have a hard time, don't we, believing that God's love is so outgoing, so undoctrinal, so marvelous. Jesus Christ died on the cross so that we may believe

it and take it to heart. To believe it is the all-important thing. Were we really to grasp it with all our heart, our life would overflow with joy and love. Even though you may have betrayed God a thousand times, as soon as you believe that this infinite love is meant for you, you will be a new creature.

Who is the elder son who did not leave his father's house, who remained with him always and worked with him and for him? He doubtless stands as a symbol for the pious, the Pharisees of Jesus' time. It is quite surprising how mildly the father rebukes the elder son in this parable. He does not deny that the elder brother faithfully lived and worked with him. He certainly acknowledges as much of us, who for a long time, perhaps from the days of our youth, have been earnest Christians, who read the Bible, go to church and Holy Communion, and engage in charitable work. It is far from him to say that all this is of no avail. Nevertheless he points out sin here in a quite different form. He shows us pious sin.

Pious sin manifests itself as a certain subservient way of doing one's duty. We sourly do what we are supposed to do; we are listless; we do not live from the riches and the joy of God. We are not truly thankful for the unspeakable privilege of knowing God and having fellowship with him. As a matter of fact, we live not really in fellowship with him at all. This is why this type of Christianity radiates so little strength and gladness, why it is hardly attractive! Who wishes to be a Christian if *this* is Christianity? Ask yourselves in how many people you have awakened the desire to become Christians by your way of meeting them? How many have you scared away from God?

Furthermore, the elder son is angry because his younger brother, scarcely recovered from loose living, is given the rights of a son and so much fuss is made over him. This is the second great sin of the pious. They are not really joyful when others find their way back to God, unless these return on their terms. The great sin of the Christian church becomes apparent here: the church as in-group, Christianity as a pious caste, way above the sinners on the wrong side of the track. Judgment is passed on others, in particular on those who confess Christ in other ways.



This is possible only because we fail to acknowledge in the sins of others our own guilt, in the godlessness of the godless world the result of a Christianity without love or life. The pious sitting in court over other people, the pious righteousness and moralizing, cannot be overcome unless we carry our neighbor's sin as our own, unless our moral indignation gives way to the sincere question of where we, too, are guilty. He who so asks will surely be given the answer.

But now let us pay attention to the quite peculiar subtlety of the pious sin. I can imagine how some of you, when I was talking of the sin of the pious, gladly said to themselves: I thank thee, God, that I am not like these pious church people with their prayerbook in hand and pious words on their lips! Others again may have thought: I thank thee, God, that I am not like these modern Christians who have experienced conversion in a jiffy, these Christian upstarts without any tradition, who should first prove their worth as we old-timers had to do!

The pious sin has various disguises, but its essence remains unchanged. It is the pious exclusiveness, the boasting of what we are or what we have and others are lacking; the spirit of Christian class and caste which prevents us from rejoicing whenever Christ is at work, be it in a familiar or an unfamiliar way. Let us ask ourselves very frankly: Is this not time and again my own sin?

Kindly and patiently, the father listens to the ill-humored speech of the elder son. He does not scold him; he only invites him; he entices him with soothing words. The parable seems to suggest the elder brother's unwillingness to change his mind. If this is so, there remains only one thing, God's dreadful judgment. No other godlessness of the world has been more severely judged by the Lord than pious godlessness, the unloving, unrepenting way of the Pharisee. "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."

Jesus has put the two great impassés of mankind before our eyes. We have tried both, and we are still trying. Let us not be deceived! The second is even worse than the first, if there is such a thing as "worse" in this context. The purpose of Jesus' telling this parable, however, was not to show us these impassés, but to

call us to repentance by proclaiming the infinite, incomprehensible love of God the Father. It is meant for us, too, for you and for me: "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand . . . and let us . . . make merry . . ." For even today there is "more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Amen.



## *The Great Banquet*

LUKE 14:15-24; MATTHEW 22:11-14

When one of those who sat at table with him heard this, he said to him, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'

"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

The gospel of the Old and New Testaments always begins with God's offer, his action on our behalf. We are not first; we do not take the initiative; we are not in the center of things. At the outset there is God, the Creator and Redeemer, who wills and accomplishes something. We ought to focus not on what we are and do, but on what God is and does. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to think that our life, our well-being, and our pains are of no significance to God, as if man were but a

short-lived, meaningless heap of live dust. Rather, this God, great beyond comprehension, whose will determines all there is, whose acting is all-decisive, and without whose consent nothing occurs, proves to know each one of us, calling us by our names and loving us more than we can possibly love ourselves. He is the Lord of the earth, but he is even more the God of all men. His eternal will is eternal providence for us and with us. His purpose, unbelievable as it may sound, is human happiness, human fulfillment. Our Lord calls it a great banquet or a wedding feast in his parable, related in somewhat different terms by Luke and Matthew.

He, and he alone, can prepare this banquet. Our human achievements are of a transitory nature and, despite their apparent brilliance, doomed to failure. We cannot convey aim and meaning, eternal content, and significance to our lives. Whatever we do falls prey to death, to earlier or later annihilation. In the face of this truth, all our boasting about man's immortal accomplishments is but an empty phrase. Either there is someone who is beyond death and annihilation, who leads our life to its eternal destination, despite death and nothingness—or else everything is for nothing. God himself informs us of his desire not to abandon us, not to be content with what little life we experience here on earth. He prepares for us the great banquet where the shadows of death, of suffering, of evil, are banished. Life everlasting, the eternal Kingdom, the only true life, this is the evangel, the good news. This is the content of the Bible.

God compares it to a banquet. So we learn that communion is God's ultimate goal with man. Communion with him—for he not only prepares this meal, he wants us to gather around him, to share in his life, his love, and his bounty, and to find fulfillment therein. This implies, furthermore, fellowship not only with him, but with one another. He invites us all together to a large, common table, not each one of us to his own separate table, his own personal bliss. Fellowship of men in the fellowship with God—this is the destiny he opens up before our eyes.

This destiny, the new eternal life, fellowship with one another through fellowship with him, must be initiated already here on



earth. This is why our Lord on that last evening of companionship with his disciples sat down to a common meal with them—both as sign and token of eternal fulfillment and as expression and means of its already beginning realization. Thus every celebration of Holy Communion should remind us of the presence of him who has and is eternal life. Our communion with him is a reality, not wishful thinking. The reality of this communion is experienced as true communion with one another. Where men live in his fellowship, there they also live in fellowship with one another, there the presence of his love and his Spirit creates new bonds among us men which otherwise do not exist and cannot exist. To be sure, the fellowship with him and the fellowship with our fellowmen in him is yet imperfect, is only in its beginnings and awaits its final consummation.

This eternal destiny of our lives, beyond our comprehension and imagination, is revealed to us by his messengers. A distant mountain peak, so far hidden to the wanderers' eyes in the fog, suddenly becomes visible with the fog lifting, now covers up, then pierces again, closer, clearer, bigger, and finally emerges right before them in all its splendor: Likewise God has announced his design for man and the world ever more clearly through his prophets until, in Jesus Christ, the goal is unveiled in marvelous clarity. God points to this goal; he promises it in his Word and, above all, in him who is called the Incarnate Word of God. Without him, without his Word, the goal would remain unknown to us. We might have some ideas about it, yet they would lack force and meaning. For how were we to grasp God's plan? Jesus Christ reveals it to us.

He not only speaks to us about it, he even invites us to join in his banquet. "I am the light of the world"—"I am the bread of life"—"He who believes in the Son shall have eternal life"—"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Whatever God has communicated through his prophets and through his Son is contained in this promise and this invitation: Come and take! "Grasp the life eternal to which you have been called." God does not give us his life by throwing it at us. We must go out and meet him, to get hold of his life, to accept

his call to come. He does not coerce anyone. He does not manipulate us like objects; he deals with us as persons. He cannot give us his love if we do not respond in love. God offers us his life through his Word, because he wishes to draw us to himself in freedom, not through magic spell, but in such a way that the miracle is called: our faith, our obedience, our response to his Word.

But what happens to God's invitation? The result, as pictured by the Lord himself, is truly deplorable. He speaks from his experience with his own people, with those who have heard the invitation. What is their reaction? They make excuses. They do not refuse outright. They do not say: We don't believe that your invitation is from God. But they have more important things to do than to pay heed to the call. Christianity did not behave any better. For nineteen hundred years the invitation has been repeated, but to this day the response has been as the Lord describes. The Christians, too, are preoccupied with more urgent matters. Business takes up all of our time. "Sure, pastor, what you say is very nice, but you are not a businessman. Our kind of people have so much to do, so many problems, that there is no time left to ponder religious questions." We are workers, we are farmers, we are employees, we are social workers or doctors, and this means: Our concerns are too time-consuming to allow for reflection on the biblical message. Above all, we have our families. We have a wife and children. We are young; we want to live first of all, to experience and to enjoy the great adventure of love between man and woman.

Dear friends, are these not very familiar ways of thinking to all of us? Who would not have to admit that this is precisely what has happened to him time and again? We do not categorically say "no"; but there are so many things that interfere. We are, willy-nilly, caught in the concerns and problems of our lives, in joy and in sorrow, with a light mind or a heavy and dark heart. As soon as the invitation is heard, it is forgotten, and mind and heart and will turn to a thousand different matters. Please do understand me well: The Lord has never said that we should not work, not live up to our jobs, not to be preoccupied with our fam-



ilies, not to love and be loved, not to create and to build, to think and to plan. He did say, unmistakably, "But seek first his kingdom . . . and all these things shall be yours as well." All these things need not stand in the way; they should not cause us to make excuses instead of accepting the invitation. Jesus does not want us to become monks and hermits. He wants us to say "yes" to his invitation and to come to him, wherever we are, each one at the post where God has placed him. He is as close to us as is the air which surrounds us. We can have fellowship with him in the midst of our worldly obligations. "Give me, my son, your heart!" This is what he wants. And when we do so, we shall see that all the other things will be ours in a new way. In the midst of our work, our jobs, our families, our politics, we shall, as new men, discover new possibilities.

On these people who have excused themselves with such seemingly good reasons, Jesus pronounces the harsh word of judgment: "For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet." They are excluded from eternal life. Not because they did some particularly evil thing, but because they brought forth excuses, because they had more important matters to attend to. This is, more than anything else, what the Bible calls sin: that we have more urgent things to do than to follow God's call. With our bourgeois honesty and trustworthy character, as good citizens beyond reproach, we are cut off from hope, separated, and cast out from God, because we have made excuses.

Then the householder in anger asked his servant to go to the streets of the city, to the highways and hedges—where the gypsies live—in order to bring the people in. If those who are invited refuse to come, others will come. God does not abandon his plan, his house must be filled. Since the majority of the Jews did not pay heed to his call, the Gentiles shall be invited. In this way the gospel spread to our lands. But the spectacle repeated itself here. The so-called Christian Europe, the world of Western civilization, has indeed heard the call, but refused, on the whole, to follow. Time and again the invitation, the gospel, the words, of the Bible have been heard; they have been printed a million times, have been memorized—without any consequences being

drawn—until the majority of people thought it more honest to say straight forwardly “no” and to call off this religious and churchly game. What will now be the householder’s reaction? He pours out his wrath, yet we remain undisturbed. He lets us live through the horrors of a world war, yet it is of no avail. Will he perhaps say one day: This is the end of these people, the end of the so-called Christian Europe? Bring them in from where they have not yet heard the good news!

God still hesitates to wipe us out. He extends a period of grace—who knows for how long? He continues to wait for our joyful acceptance. He expects us to come to him, to his feast. But what does it mean: to accept, to come? Let us meditate the strange ending of the parable as recorded by Matthew. When the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. There were guests, after all. Not all the people had themselves excused. Dear friends, Jesus Christ has not come in vain; he has not called in vain. There were some who said “yes” and did come. They formed the rather small group who are called the church in the New Testament. The true church, made up of people whose hearts have been opened, who have come to see what it means: “. . . lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” They can mightily testify: “The Lord has done great things for us. Let us be joyful and glad.” We have found him and in fellowship with him we have found one another. Through a new access to him we have found a new access to our fellowmen. These people may confirm that “in everything God works for good with those who love him,” that it is true that for those who “seek first his kingdom” all other things shall be added, that in fellowship with the Giver of life, life in the world receives a new meaning, a new orientation.

But among them is an intruder, who does not belong. A blind passenger. He is thrown by the Lord without pity into outer darkness. Who is he, why is he out of place, why does he not really belong here?” “He had no wedding garment” is the Lord’s explanation. As for each guest, the host had prepared for him

a festive robe according to Oriental custom. But he was too lazy to change. He preferred to sit down at the table in his own dirty rags. What does this mean?

Some people—and their number is legion since the proclamation of the gospel—are well pleased to listen to the word of the forgiveness of sins and of everlasting life. They rush in, eager to participate. But one thing they are unwilling to do: to put on the wedding garment, discarding their dirty rags outside the door, as it is expected of those who are desirous of joining. They are ready to receive forgiveness, to accept God's mercy, but they are unprepared to get rid of their old things. They are reluctant to draw the consequences inherent in the forgiveness of sins. They want to get hold of the new life as a gift, without, in Paul's formulation, putting on the new man and putting away the old. They refuse to cast off the dirty patchwork of the old being, although it is irreconcilable with the new life. They want to believe, but not to obey: to enjoy and to rejoice, but not to change their ways. They want to belong to God, but not to put an end to sin, to greed, to lack of consideration, to haughty judgment, to the respectability and the comfort of the old life. They are unwilling to turn around, to submit to God's discipline. They would like to have the cake and eat it: God's love and self-love; God's mercy and their own merciless, self-centered hearts; God's joy and their own sorrows. They hope to live as parasites in God's kingdom without doing their part of the work. But God does not suffer parasites and fellow travelers. These things are mutually exclusive: to give one's heart to God, and yet remain as before; to receive God's love, and yet be loveless. Reconciliation between these contradictory attitudes is as impossible as between fire and water. Either the fire extinguishes, or the water evaporates. Either communion with God is lost, or the old man must be reborn, re-created by his Maker. He who wants to fit into the new mold of the life of the Kingdom must permit himself to be recast, for the old mold does not fit any longer. If he resists this process, he will be discarded. He has played a reckless game with God, and God will cast him out, unless he agrees at the last minute to be recast and re-formed.



No wonder the closing words of the parable are extremely severe: "Many are called, but few are chosen." The invitation goes out to many; we may even say to all. Every one is entitled to hear it. Not all who hear it pay heed, however. Chosen are only those who not only listen, but obey; who not only "say yes" but "do yes."

Is it possible for us to obey and to get actively involved? Dear friends, do we presume to know better than the Lord Jesus and his Apostles? Fully aware of our weakness, Jesus does not require perfect obedience overnight. He does expect, however, that we, receiving forgiveness, are ready to forgive; that we, entering his house, submit to its order without grumbling, joyfully, as new beings. We cannot make God's gift our own except by accepting it as a task worth our efforts. "You have received the new life" is the Apostle's reminder in his Letter to the Romans. Very well then, live it! The wedding garment is laid out; all we have to do is to put it on. He who is too lazy to do so forfeits God's mercy. Let us ask God for the right obedience. Amen.

## *The Good Samaritan*

LUKE 10:25-37

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

This parable is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. As all other sayings of our Lord, it aims at making God's will known in such a way that each and every listener is forced to admit: This concerns me, I cannot escape from God. Our Lord Jesus preached mightily, it is said, unlike the scribes. Our story and the preceding conversation prove it. Jesus inescapably confronts us with God; in him God himself speaks to us. Reading a story of Jesus is an experience unlike any other: In his person, God has come near me. To pass him by is to pass God by. His

mystery is God's mystery; in his presence his own promise is fulfilled: The Kingdom of God is at hand. In the stories and in the words of Jesus, God himself is present, calling us to decision. Let us therefore ask God to have us make the right decision through his Word.

Not like the scribes . . . ! Here comes a teacher of divine knowledge and asks Jesus a tricky question in order to embarrass him. We theologians do not fare very well in the Bible. It is a risky business to be a scribe, whether pastor or theologian. Are you aware of this? Do you help your ministers and seminary professors through intercession and brotherly admonition? A lot of complaining about us preachers goes on behind our backs, yet how rarely do people dare to honestly tell us their grievances! It is indeed a dangerous undertaking constantly to expound before others the things most high, even though it is done in obedience to our calling and as an expression of joy. For we almost inevitably create an image which does not correspond to reality and thus become hypocrites. Pray for us, dear friends!

The scribe in the parable did precisely the obvious and yet so terrible thing: He used the most sacred truth as a means of escape. The most serious question a man may ask is this: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The Lord's answer makes it clear that he is far from considering this question as wrong or inappropriate. The opposite is true. Twice in the New Testament, in the story of Pentecost and in the story of the jailer at Philippi, this question reappears. It is uttered there in ultimate seriousness and finds its corresponding answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." But here the answer is different because the question is only used as a pretext by the scribe.

In this instance Jesus' reply takes the form of another question: "What is written in the law? How do you read?" He refuses to admit a hidden, unknown dimension, begging for clarification. The will of God is clearly expressed in the Bible.

Some questions are but an escape and pretext. Asking and discussing is less costly than acting out. This is the very pitfall of theology. However, as the conversation between Jesus and the scribe develops, it becomes obvious that scholarship in itself is



not meaningless or even evil for that matter. The answer given by the scribe does indeed full honor to his theology: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

He had studied his Bible well and did not get caught in details. With amazing assurance, he got hold of the essentials, summing up the whole content of the Scriptures in two sentences: love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." The Lord has nothing to criticize about or to add to the answer of the scribe. He passed his theological exam brilliantly. Indeed, love of God and love of neighbor are the issue when the question is asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" So, and not otherwise, God has revealed his will. The Lord himself has confirmed elsewhere that all the law and the prophets depend on these two words. The Apostle Paul, too, calls love the fulfillment of the law.

What, then, so we ask, is added in the New Testament if all this is already contained in the Old Testament? Two seemingly contradictory answers are possible here. Everything is added, and nothing is added. Let me use a comparison. If a composer has put down on paper a new symphony—the parts are written out to the last note—what then may be added? Nothing and everything. The notes must become sounds, the symphony must be played. Such is Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament. He is the fulfillment, the realization, or, as St. John says, "the Word became flesh." In Jesus Christ, the will of God, expressed by words in the Old Testament, is present in one person. Nothing is different, yet everything is different. The New Testament as well as the Old centers in the love of God and of neighbor. But this love has become a reality in Jesus Christ. Consequently, we do not recognize anything new in him, yet everything is new in comparison to the Old Testament. By doing God's will, Jesus truly reveals the Father. This is the lesson the scribe has to learn.

Nothing could be more uncomfortable and more disturbing to this scholar than Jesus' simple reply: "do this, and you will live." To those who know their Bible—and I not only mean the

theologians among us, but include all of you who have been exposed to religious instruction from the days of your youth and, I hope, daily read the Scriptures—nothing is as disquieting as this short comment: “You have answered right; do this”! Biblical knowledge is helpful and necessary. The more you absorb of it the better. We can never get enough insight. But remember, the message always insists on the doing. At this the Bible readers and scholars make long faces. To love God and our neighbor as ourselves—not only to know this, but to do it! You see, at this point I am tempted to step down from the pulpit because I am unable to face this simple sentence: “You have answered right; do this”! My love of God and neighbor is time and again found wanting. To love God with all our heart, with all our strength!

True, I know something of this love and I imagine you do, too. I know that this is not a mere command, given by God once upon a time; I take it to be the true meaning of my life. I know through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, my Master and Redeemer, that this love is the one and only thing that matters; for God loves me; he has loved me first, despite my sin; he loves me although I betray him time and again, running away from him like a stubborn child. I know that God is love and that in his love the mystery of life is solved. Experience tells me that nothing is more blessed than to love God with all my heart. You know this as well. For, as the Apostle says, when we are at peace with God through redemption in Jesus Christ, God’s love is poured out in our hearts through his Holy Spirit. This is no theory; it is reality as we have experienced it and shall experience it again and again.

But unfortunately this reality is not the only one. True, were we always in him, in faith, in the attitude of prayer, always led by the Holy Spirit, then indeed, the love of God would be the one and only center of our lives, enabling us to overcome all bitterness, sorrow, and anxiety. The love of God consumes everything as the sun consumes the morning mist. And then the love of our neighbor, complementary to the love of God, would become equally real. For he who loves God with all his heart is

bound to love his neighbor as himself. This, however, is not always our situation. We keep falling back into selfishness. There is not one among us who might affirm: I love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself.

As a result, we run the same risk as the scribe. As soon as he grasped the seriousness of the situation he tried to escape, hiding behind the question: "And who is my neighbor?" He misuses his theologically trained mind by endeavoring to evade the command: "do this, and you will live." He employs his biblical scholarship in order to make complicated what is easy and to sidestep the issue in the ensuing confusion. It is the curse of a certain knowledgeability of the Scriptures to take the Bible as a pretext for the purpose of bypassing God. The Scriptures then must serve as a kind of bulwark against God. Dear friends, how great is the guilt of Christianity for having used the Bible, faith, the confession of Jesus Christ, as a means of avoiding God's claim! As a matter of fact, as we shall see shortly, believers did the very opposite of what true understanding of the Word of God and true faith would require. How many use their piety mainly to hide when faced with this simple Word of God: "do this, and you will live."

God, however, is infinitely patient. Instead of admonishing the scribe: "Hypocrite, I fully recognize the crooked intention of your question!" he relates the marvelous story of the good Samaritan in reply to the question: Who is my neighbor? Jesus reverses the question, as the end of the story will show. The scribe had asked: "Who is my neighbor?" Thereby he not only attempts to evade responsible action by engaging in a discussion of generalities, but also betrays his own selfish way of thinking. He does not want to love if he can help it. He inquires about cases where he cannot get around it, where he is obliged to help, as one may consult the law concerning personal liability toward a needy relative. Jesus reverses the question by asking us in turn: To whom are you a neighbor? Whom do you treat as a neighbor? To make this quite clear, he tells the parable of the good Samaritan.

The story, in itself so simple and easily understood, does not



call for elaborate explanations. Rather, let us ask ourselves: How do I get into a similar situation? We may at one time or another encounter someone lying by the wayside and clamoring for help—for that first aid which, in view of this parable we have called since “Samaritan’s aid”—yet this may occur to one in a thousand and once in ten years. But is it really necessary to lie by the wayside, attacked by robbers, in order to need help? There is helplessness and there are wounds, there are even robbers who abandon their victims every day in your own backyard. Are you aware of the troubles of the man next door? Do you share the hidden sorrow of your husband or wife? They are legion who later testify: My father and mother had not the slightest idea of my problems. What do you know about the true feelings of your colleagues or employees? It sometimes happens that suddenly a man commits suicide to the horror of his acquaintances; none of them had guessed his suffering and despair. Let God show you in a quiet moment of prayer to whom you may be a neighbor!

However, Jesus focuses in this parable on our reluctance to help our neighbor rather than on our ignorance of his needs. Accordingly Jesus chooses examples where the duty to assist was beyond question. A priest goes down that road; truly, a minister of God cannot pass by such a helpless person without realizing that assistance is imperative. Yet he refuses to offer help. He is afraid, and besides, helping is bothersome. Should you help someone—and are you afraid? Has a neighbor fallen among robbers who stole his good name and you are called upon to restore his reputation—but are you afraid of similar treatment? Is another beyond the shadow of a doubt in need of comfort—and you fear the consequences? For the most part, selfishness, pure and simple, makes us pass by. I want to spend my money, my time, my strength, for my own benefit rather than for others. Keep your shirt on! Examine yourselves to see whether this massive selfishness does not play a much greater role in your life than you are willing to admit.

After the priest and the Levite came the Samaritan. The first two could be supposed to have a perfect understanding of their duty. The Samaritan, on the other hand, had good reasons for

passing by, humanly speaking. He is an enemy of the people. Why should those Jews concern me? May the Jews help the Jews! In the face of human misery, Jesus says, there is no distinction before God; there are neither believers nor unbelievers, neither Catholics nor Protestants, neither democrats nor monarchists. There are only people created by God, people whose suffering and pain is against his will. Dear friends, never let these catchwords, born of a godless, pagan spirit, get over our lips and even less into our hearts! Let not this evil spirit poison us! Let us not become so "spiritual," so "Christian," so "biblical," as to lose sight of the essential truth of God's Word in a maze of biblical scholarship or to despise this truth in Christian pride as "mere morals" or commonplace. At the last judgment God will inquire more into our help to the helpless, whoever he may be, than into our various theologies or our identification with the different religious groups. The Bible deals with essentials: love of God and love of neighbor. This is its distinguishing mark. Do not buy the slogan that this is mere morals! It is biblical truth, and all the law and the prophets depend on it. This is the Lord's own affirmation. Do not allow the scribes to distort it into its very opposite. Whoever has been redeemed in Jesus Christ knows the essential truth. He knows that the doing, and not the knowledge, is important.

One more thing stands out in this parable. The Samaritan's help is the most natural thing in the world. He does not preach a sermon to the poor man; he does not convert him, nor does he invite him to a meeting when he has recovered. On the contrary, he offers effective help. He desires, quite simply, to restore the damage suffered by this child of God. This the world had to learn from the gospel, for it could not know it of itself. And this is what Christianity, in a wrong understanding of the spiritual life, has time and again obscured. To help man where he needs help most urgently, this one materially, that one emotionally, a third one spiritually. The mainspring of true assistance, to be sure, is always of a spiritual nature. It is the love that flows from God. But the assistance itself is far from being always spiritual. It is, as a rule, quite material, obvious, old-fashioned.



One last thing remains to be said. Jesus leaves no doubt: It is the neighbor who must be helped. People have sought to widen love of neighbor into love of humanity. In reality they thereby only proved their ignorance of what the Bible calls love. Love is always very personal. It has to do with people whom I meet personally. It is not concerned with the human race as such, but with a particular individual in need of help. He may be far away, yet he is a real person, not a pale idea or abstraction. One cannot love ideas in the way the Bible speaks of love. One can only love people, God and one's neighbor. Even better: God and the one neighbor who stands in need of me right now. It is so much easier to get excited about extensive humanitarian programs, to set up big national or international enterprises, than to love one's neighbor as oneself. Out of this true love great things are born: Love is not content with the individual. Yet it is always meant for the individual and never loses sight of him even when reaching beyond. Neighborly love has nothing to do with philanthropy or the promotion of human happiness.

Neighborly love is life from God himself. This is the central affirmation of the biblical message. It comes by the Holy Spirit. There is as much of the Spirit in you as there is love of the neighbor in your life. You have as much faith as you have neighborly love. You love God as much as your neighbor experiences your love. No other faith is acceptable to God, as Paul says, except the one that is acted out in love.

Jesus stopped short the question of the scribe: "Who is my neighbor?" by reversing it: "To whom are you a neighbor?" This is how we, in turn, must ask. For love is not a law. Love is the new life. It reigns where God has won power over us through his Word, where God has redeemed us from the spell of guilt and sin, through his Son.

If God were not to have mercy on us in Jesus Christ, the words about love of God and of neighbor would shatter us. For no one can stand the judgment of these two words. But now he has had mercy on us; through his Spirit, he has broken the spell of evil in us and opened up the way to love. All the more the command holds true: "Go and do likewise." Forgiveness of sins

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is not offered as a dispensation from acting out our neighborly love, but as an incentive to exercise it, forcefully and joyfully. When God has truly become the Father, it is no longer possible for a person not to see his neighbor as his brother. Let us earnestly examine our love of God and love of neighbor so that we may again and with a new intentness turn to him who alone may give true love to us and all those who ask him. Amen.

## *The Merciful King and the Unforgiving Servant*

MATTHEW 18:23-35

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

The entire gospel is contained in this parable. It is so simple, so clear, that one is tempted to conclude: Now you have heard it; go home and do likewise. We human beings, however, are a forgetful generation, hard of hearing and, at the same time, given to easy living. For this reason we would wish to reinforce the voice of the Scriptures as if through a loudspeaker and to fasten in our hearts what the parable has to say.

The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king. The Kingdom of God is no democracy. Unpleasant as it may sound to Swiss ears, it is a monarchy. Democracy may or may not be

the best form of government among men. The Bible is silent about this question, leaving it to our own judgment and implementation. But in the Kingdom of heaven only one will prevail. Here God is the unconditional and absolute King. God's Kingship is a parable, as is the name of the Father. We know its meaning. The Kingdom of God or, in the wording of the original text, the kingly reign of God, consists in the uncontested power of God's will. This is at stake in the Bible: unconditional obedience to God's will. We are asked: Are you ready and willing to do what God requests? He is your Creator, your Father, your Master, and you belong wholly to him. Everything you possess is his. Are you or are you not prepared to acknowledge his claim? Unconditionally? Are you willing to give a blank signature, meaning: Everything you will order me to do, although I do not know it and cannot know it at the present time, I will do? This decision is at stake in the Bible.

We modern men find it particularly difficult to take this step. We are eager to have religion as well. Almost everyone agrees today that we cannot do without religion. A religion, however, where God does not rule over us, but lives within us—a God, or rather a divinity, who does not stand over against us as a commander, but puts us in the center of things, even on the throne. The story of the Fall has lost none of its validity. The serpent murmurs: "You shall be like God," and we like to hear this promise. Does not one of us, perhaps the greatest of modern men, tell us bluntly, "If there were gods, friends, who could stand it not to be one of them? Therefore, there are no gods." This God above us is not to our liking; hence, he does not exist. Our reason for resisting him is not science—there have been at all times, and there are still today, great scientists who wholeheartedly believe in God—but solely our will to be god ourselves.

To live without God is an ever-renewed endeavor of the human race. Both the so-called unbelievers, the atheists, and we ourselves, the believers, the church folks, behave like those laborers in the parable to whom the landowner had let out the vineyard, yet who played owners themselves, refusing to acknowledge their rightful lord. We are, and we all know it, not the masters



of our lives. Life and its laws are not our creation. We have received these as a trust and must one day settle accounts. We are responsible. Each human being, whether believer or unbeliever, is aware of this responsibility. Were we to take our responsibility seriously, we would take God seriously. God's Lordship and our responsibility is one and the same thing. On the other hand, if we behave as our own masters, as though our life, our money, our time, our strength, depended on us alone, we are godless, our so-called belief or unbelief notwithstanding.

We ourselves, and not God, must bear the consequences of this godlessness. The fools say in their hearts: There is no god. But he whose throne is in heaven laughs at them; the Lord mocks them. God's sovereignty does not depend on our acknowledging him. But we depend on it. Whoever runs against God's will, thinking that God is none of his concern, resembles a drunken driver who runs against a stone wall: He is bound to crash. We may forget God; but we cannot abolish him through our forgetfulness. In our denial of God we behave like ostriches which, as the saying goes, bury their heads in the sand at the approach of the enemy, assuming he does not exist because he is invisible. Indifference toward God belies such foolish policy and wishful thinking. The damage is his who engages in it. He only destroys himself. The result may not be evident, it may even bespeak the contrary, yet the words remain true: Sin is man's defeat. Sin equals godlessness, the desire to be one's own master in life.

This is the experience of the servant in the parable. He carelessly treated his master's possessions as his own, and the result was bankruptcy. Now he is placed before his royal judge to receive his verdict. What else could it be but total condemnation? He and his family are to be thrown into prison. Thus justice is restored. Misuse of God's property entails God's judgment.

God's judgment is no longer a very popular subject. Do you remember the saying of the modern philosopher mentioned a moment ago? With a slight change in emphasis it now runs: If there were a judgment, who could survive it? Therefore, there is no judgment! Such reasoning is understandable, even logical, on the part of those who choose to ignore God. But it is foolish in

the highest degree on the part of Christians under biblical guidance. It is also said: The thought of divine judgment only causes anxiety, and anxiety does no good. Therefore let's drop the subject. And our Lord Jesus, who frequently and severely mentions judgment, should he not have been aware of this? Whoever discards the idea of judgment does away with the Kingdom of God; he fashions a god to his liking who bears no resemblance to the God as he is taught in Scriptures and lives in reality. As for anxiety, we need to fear God's judgment in order to learn how to ask God's forgiveness as did the servant in the parable. How can we pray seriously: "And forgive us our debts" unless we are afraid of God's judgment? For this reason it is necessary to speak time and again of divine judgment, to hear often about it, so that we may learn how to implore God's pardon in the manner of the servant. Otherwise we are tempted by the godless thought of taking forgiveness for granted.

The most horrible blindness might well be to take God's forgiveness for granted, to suppose that God cannot refuse it since as our Creator he is duty-bound to pardon us. Once an unashamed mocker, when asked on his deathbed whether he was not afraid, said: "Dieu pardonnera, c'est son métier." "God will pardon, that's his job." To take God's forgiveness for granted is the greatest blasphemy. We do well to remember that God is quite free to forgive or not to forgive. This is his kingly privilege, the privilege to pardon: I have mercy on whom I choose; I grant pardon to whom I wish.

Forgiveness is not self-evident, but judgment is. Our own conscience tells us so. Every person is afraid when he has done something wrong. Not only on account of human consequences. He may be most afraid when no one is aware of his wrongdoing and there is no chance of its ever being known. This loneliness—you may experience it right now—breeds anxiety. It is not fear of men—although guilt makes a person suspicious of other people—it is fear of God. Well-founded, justified fear of God's judgment.

Only this fear makes us understand in the first place what God's pardon, his forgiveness of our debts, is like. To abolish



this fear would mean to destroy the understanding of forgiveness. In his anxiety the servant fell down before his kingly lord and implored his mercy, his pardon.

And now the great event takes place. The judge puts down his robe, the king his purple, and, as father, approaches the trembling, anxiety-ridden servant, pressing him to his heart. The bondletter is torn and declared invalid; everything is forgiven. When it happens to one of us that God forgives all his debts, a miracle happens, the greatest miracle of all. Forgiveness of sin is an even greater miracle than the resurrection of the dead. For the resurrected Lazarus had to die again. But a debt forgiven is forgiven for all eternity. Forgiveness of sin means not only the breaking down of a barrier between God and us; it is at the same time the building up of the right relationship between the Creator and us. Forgiveness of sin, acceptance of God's mercy, is nothing less than sonship, the establishment of communion between God and us. Whenever this occurs, something unheard of, a great miracle takes place. Truly the very opposite of the self-evident! The very opposite of what we may know in advance or by ourselves.

What do we know by ourselves? What may we know, each one of us? This much we do know by ourselves: We are responsible, and this means that we must settle accounts with God concerning all our doings. Furthermore: We cannot prevail in God's judgment for we are slothful, unfaithful servants. No voice from heaven is needed to tell us so. Our own conscience tells us that we have merited God's judgment a thousandfold. I am always amazed at those who dare to say: I have nothing to reproach myself with; I have done no wrong. Really? Are you so much better than I? Perhaps so. As for me, I know that I have denied God and my Lord Jesus Christ innumerable times in my life; every day I catch myself behaving like my own lord and master and unlike a true servant of Jesus Christ. This is, God knows, my predicament, and it is, God knows, yours too, isn't it? Let us therefore bring it before God and plead for his mercy.

But can we know whether he truly forgives us? How did the servant know it? Because he saw it happen before his own eyes.



The king tore the bondletter in his presence. But how can we know it? Not only because Jesus affirms it; we would probably not accept his words as sufficient proof. But God exemplifies pardon before our eyes. He implements forgiveness on the cross of Jesus Christ. Here, in Paul's words, the bond which stood against us is canceled by being nailed to the cross.

Does not the death on the cross make forgiveness self-evident after all, at least for us Christians? The Crucifixion has taken place, the divine Word of forgiveness has been deposited there like an inheritance, and whoever so desires may go and get it.

The answer to this question is to be found in the second part of the parable. Here is explained what needs to be done on our part before God's pardon may become a reality in our lives. This second part of the parable should not be left out, as unfortunately is done quite often. When we pray "And forgive us our debts," we are not allowed to brush over the ensuing "As we forgive our debtors," or else pardon becomes again self-evident and as such blasphemous. The forgiveness of the debt, we are told, was complete. The king does not consider the amount of money owed. It was enormous. Yet without hesitating he crosses it out with a stroke of his pen. Nor does he inquire into the dignity of the debtor. Each and every person may acquire complete forgiveness for any debt whatsoever. There is only one requirement attached to it: "if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The servant owed his master ten thousand talents, a staggering sum. His fellow servant owed him a hundred denarii, a ridiculously small amount. Yet he refused to release him, insisting on his good right, as it was indeed his privilege. But at this very moment, he lost God's mercy. It is impossible to have at one and the same time a relationship with God based on grace and a relationship with man based on law. You intend to insist upon your right over against your neighbor? You may indeed do so; only, God will then insist upon his right against you. Or you wish to share in God's mercy? Then you must live with your neighbors, not according to the law, but according to mercy. This is the principle, the vital condition of the divine-human relationship. Here we get a glimpse into the

deepest mystery of the gospel which is so seldom rightly understood.

For one thing, we constantly tend to take much more tragically the wrongs other people inflict upon us than the wrongs we inflict on God, although their trespasses against us are nothing compared to ours against him. As long as this situation prevails, the Lord informs us, there will be no forgiveness. It cannot be effective in us, the message of the cross will not be understood and will not be of any help. The cross of Christ is no magic sign; it is not enough to touch it in order to be healed. The cross of Christ is the Word of God which is only effective when we accept it. The cross of Christ, this most tremendous action-Word ever spoken by God, has this to say to you and me: Here, man, you see what you have done. Here you see the greatness of your debt. Here you see what it costs God to reach out to you through the maze of your godlessness. This had to happen for you. Do you finally comprehend who you are? Do you finally acknowledge the greatness of your debt? As long as you are not crushed by it, you will not be able to see the cross. You belong there, on the gallows where he hangs, on account of your trespasses against God. As long as you do not recognize this, you will not hear the message of the cross, and you may only pretend to know the divine pardon. Only when you see your own guilt being sentenced on the cross will you experience forgiveness. You must be crucified with Christ if his cross is to be your help.

When this takes place, when you acknowledge at the cross or from the cross where you really stand, then God will tell you how he stands by you, how he loves you in spite of all and everything. Then it happens that you yourself receive his love. Where you are crucified with Christ, God makes you also rise with him, rise to a new life, his love. This new creation in God's love is now a sign of your being forgiven, of authenticity. Where a person is not renewed in God's love, his guilt is not canceled, he only imagined it. Whoever has received forgiveness cannot remain unchanged. For to receive forgiveness means precisely to receive God's love. And whoever receives God's love, lives in this love. He is bound to meet his fellowmen in love as God met him in



love. He is bound to be with his fellowmen as God has been with him.

This, I repeat, is the great mystery of the gospel: Our relationship with God and our relationships with our neighbors are never two different things, but are one and the same. We cannot sin against God except by doing wrong to one of our brothers. The opposite is true, too. If our relationship with God is made new, our relationship with our fellowmen is made new by the same token. In other words, we cannot receive mercy and love from God unless we are in turn full of love and mercy toward our brothers. The one is not possible without the other. He who basks in the sun becomes himself a light, radiating warmth. He who lives in God's love cannot but reflect it upon his fellowmen. He who has found Christ must, as Luther boldly affirms, become a Christ to other people. He who is not himself a forgiving, merciful, and loving person only demonstrates that he has not truly experienced God's mercy and love. He who does not help to carry the guilt of others has not yet made the cross of Christ his own.

You see, this is why so many people today do not want to be bothered with Christianity. All they hear are Christian words; they fail to see any Christian deeds. The most penetrating sermons about Christ and his pardon are of no avail without a Christian community behind them to indicate the way of Christ. The secular people sense genuine faith much more readily than we think. They soon discover where there are but empty words, and where behind the words there is a corresponding reality and a corresponding action. Christianity of mere words has gone bankrupt—not because the words were wrong, not even because words need implementation by deeds, but only because words without deeds are not genuine, because they do not originate from a true encounter with Christ, but from a mere theory about him. And this is indeed of no use. We are helped not by a theory about forgiveness, a mere teaching about pardon, but only by effective forgiveness which we receive by Christ himself and by him alone.

But how can we break through to Christ, to this power and this life? There is no other way than that indicated in this para-



ble, as in the one of the prodigal son. We must come to ourselves, arise, and go to our Father, saying: "I have sinned and am no longer worthy to be called your son" or fall on our knees before the King to implore his mercy. Where this takes place, we will understand the cross of Christ, even better, we will meet him, the crucified, to receive from his hands the judgment of our guilt, forgiveness, and his wholly incomprehensible love. It is not necessary to have first a certain theory about the cross; it is sufficient to be entirely honest with ourselves and to acknowledge our predicament in order to realize that we need both, the word of pardon and the deed of reconciliation. Then God speaks himself to us in the Word of the cross of his Christ. At the very moment we feel our need of Christ, we shall meet him and receive new life from him. May God give it to many, even to all of us. Amen.

## *The Weeds Among the Wheat*

MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil-doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

In this parable the Lord gives us a cross section of world history. Christian faith requires a comprehensive look at the entire human race, the history of the whole world. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Bible opens with the creation of all things; it closes with the end of world history in the second coming of Christ. "Amen, Come, Lord Jesus." Without this comprehensive view of historical events, we cannot

be genuine Christians. For the completion of history, the coming of the heavenly Kingdom as fulfillment of the design of God's creation is the content of the gospel. Faith therefore widens our horizon. A narrow-minded faith is a contradiction of terms. Time and again we are tempted either to be exclusively preoccupied with our own sorrows and sins, or to consider the great historical events with the eyes of an ordinary newspaper reader. We should, however, learn to read the papers as we read the Bible and, in turn, to read the Bible as we read the papers, so that the Bible would become very real, very present-day, and the papers very biblical, i.e., integrated into the framework of God's design. Shall we not make a beginning in this direction by quietly imploring God from now on when we are reading the newspaper to speak to us through the news of the day and, on the other hand, by asking him when we are reading the Scriptures to open our eyes for contemporary events?

The Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God is again the main theme of this parable, as of most others. The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. The Kingdom of God is at stake, and not your salvation, not the church, not world betterment. Thy Kingdom come! What matters is that eternity breaks into time, that God's love and eternal life permeate all there is, that whatever resists God's nature will be abolished—evil, injustice, suffering, death, mortality, imperfection. Do we really believe this, dear friends? Do you believe that you, too, move toward this eternal goal? And if you do believe it, is this faith in the eternal destiny of all things the decisive force in your life? Do you give thanks, every morning anew, for this tremendous hope in the midst of darkness and the troubles of our time? Does this hope make you a joyful person, undisturbed by the small concerns and anxieties of your private life because you have this wide horizon and this marvelous outlook on the end of all things? Do you really live as one who marches toward this goal? Do you first seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness? Can you truly be called a servant of God's Kingdom? This is what makes a Christian, doesn't it? A Christian is identified as a servant of God's Kingdom.



Our Lord continues by explaining how the Kingdom exists and grows. It exists because God himself acts in human life through his Son, creating sons of the Kingdom through his Word and through his Spirit. These are, as the parable says, the good seed. The Kingdom of heaven begins already in this transitory, historical world. It is established wherever, though in a hidden way, human beings have become sons or children of God through Jesus Christ. It is established where the spirit of Pentecost blows, where human hearts are opened and cleansed by the Holy Spirit, where people live according to God's commandments and hence are at peace with their fellowmen. The Kingdom is established where there is honest and humble prayer, where God is praised from the depth of a trusting heart, where a man knows that his sins are forgiven and that he therefore may not sin again and must not sin again. The Kingdom of God would be better translated as being God's reign. Where God rules, where his will is done, where no longer man's will, but God's will is the master of the house, the factory, the school, the office, a friendship, a marriage—there is God's Kingdom.

To be sure, the Kingdom is only in its beginnings, in the process of growing. It is therefore more or less hidden. Everything here on earth is only in its beginnings, in the process of growing. The true Kingdom, however, as we said earlier, is fulfillment, completion, perfection, eternity. A bud is not the fruit itself—and yet it is the fruit in the process of ripening. Likewise our communion with God is far from being perfect. How incomplete, how half-hearted it remains! How do we deny it through our words and our deeds! And yet we hold on firmly: We are bound to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through faith in him and love of him. We are sons of the Kingdom and neither relapses nor disappointments shall tear us away from it. So there are not only individual Christians belonging to the Kingdom of heaven, there is also the community of the faithful of all times and in all places, joined to him, the Head, as a body of which the individuals are the members. This community of the Lord is often called the church. But I prefer not to use this term, for it is misleading on account of its several meanings. Dangerous errors

arise when the same name is employed to designate the community of Jesus Christ or a legal body. The church of Zürich or of Berne or the Methodist Church are here to serve the formation of the true community of Jesus Christ. God willing, true community exists within these churches and hence the Kingdom of God grows in their midst. Let us stick to the term "community" and we shall avoid many a dangerous misunderstanding.

But now the Lord calls our attention to a shattering fact. Within this community of Jesus Christ something alien grows, something unfitting, a plant which compares to the true community as weeds do to wheat. In the midst of Christianity, even amidst our congregation of the established churches and the free churches, grow the devil's weeds. In the very midst, on the same field, there are the weeds with the wheat, shaft next to shaft. This is the sad aspect of the history of Christianity throughout the ages. It begins very early; the Apostles already had to fight against it: heresy, fanaticism, legalism, self-centeredness, moralism, superstition. Just think of what has been offered to the world under the name of Christianity! What organized Christendom has done, claimed, resisted, sought, or fought in the name of Christ! Read once a survey of church history and you will feel as I do: We are brought to tears because the shining message of the divine gospel has been tarnished and twisted and turned into its very opposite. How different has been our Lord's intention upon gathering his disciples from the result as it appeared under the name of the Christian church and of churchly Christianity! How much we darkened God's revelation by our Christianity and Christendom! The devil's seed in the garden of God!

We must for once say a word about the devil. I have for a long time refused to believe in him. Evil could be sufficiently explained, it seemed to me, by its origin in the human heart and by the will to say "no" to God's command. Today I am more and more convinced, however, that the idea of the devil is not one of the old-fashioned concepts of Scriptures, but indeed the very presupposition of the biblical message of redemption. There is not only a power of evil—we all know this—there is



furthermore a personal center of all evil powers, a kingdom of evil with a ruler and master, a well-prepared counterattack against God's reign, a strategy of evil. The offensive is launched the more passionately and forcefully the more mightily the Kingdom of God advances. The devil preferably attacks us when we are marching forward on the narrow road, taking us by surprise like a robber from his hiding place and trying to throw us off the right path. This is, of course, in no way an excuse for the evil which we subsequently do. For the devil cannot force anyone; he can only tempt us. Not in vain is he called the tempter. As soon as we give in to the temptation, we are guilty and bear full responsibility for our actions. The temptation is ever-present and is often greatest where God's strength is most powerfully active. There the evil one prepares his counterattack, there he employs his last reserves. For he tries to prevent, at all cost, that a man be brought entirely under God's control. This is what the Scriptures teach, and this is also my personal experience. Modern psychologists may offer a different explanation of these facts, but I for one think that Mephistopheles' verdict in Goethe's *Faust* applies to them: People never notice the devil, although he may already be at their throat. The refusal to believe in the devil might well be a trick of the devil himself, a smoke screen maneuver which allows him to go about his business all the more undisturbed.

His works are the weeds in the field where the Lord sowed his good seed. The history of the entire world is, in the last analysis, the battle between the reign of God and the reign of the devil. True, the devil is not another god, as powerful as God or of equal rank. He is placed under God, and ultimately it is not in his power to do what God forbids. This is something which we cannot understand, but only believe. We know that God is almighty despite the devil; we fail to understand, however, why he leaves so much leeway to evil, unless he wants to put our obedience to the test, to fashion in us an obedience of faith through battle, which is inevitably stronger than an obedience gained without any effort at all. All we understand and know is the fact that Jesus Christ has come to destroy the world of the



devil and that we are called upon to resist the old enemy with all the strength of faith and prayer, of obedience and loyalty to God.

To deduct from our parable the idea of non-resistance against the attacks of the devil would indeed be a grave and devastating misunderstanding. "Let both grow together" is most certainly not to be interpreted in this way. The story of the temptation of our Lord is sufficiently clear about this point. On the contrary, we are to resist the devil to the last. Faith can be described as battle against evil. The fight goes on from morning till night, day by day, year by year, until we may rest in peace where the evil one has no access. The only way to do battle is constantly to remember that I belong to God, I am the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ, I belong to the world of light and no longer to the reign of darkness. The devil cannot be fought directly. We can overcome him only by opposing his rule with the name of Christ. For he does not fear us, he only fears Christ. Our own will and our own strength are insufficient to destroy him. But in the confrontation with Christ he must yield. Hence we need not be afraid of him. "If God is for us, who may be against us?" Clothed in the whole armor of God, as the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, we are able to quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. Fear is forbidden, but we must know him and exercise ourselves instantly to notice his approach in the manner of soldiers in the trenches who smell poison gas. Gas masks must be put on even before the onset of the attack. We must immediately protect ourselves with the Word of Christ—and the enemy will not prevail against us.

What then is the real meaning of the words: "Let both grow together until the harvest"? Jesus forbids us to hinder by force the existence and the work of the evil one. All coercive means are ruled out in the community of Christ. Faith and force are mutually exclusive. The state is justified in employing force, for by force alone may justice triumph against the opposition of the die-hard. Without force the state cannot exist or maintain its order. But the community of Christ is governed by different laws. If only the church of Jesus Christ had held fast to this truth! If only it had lived in accordance with these words! But how often did

it rely upon the power of the state to achieve its own ends and thereby did infinite damage to the cause of God it sought to further! Even the subtle means of force—such as soft-sell, persuasion, the promise of various advantages—fall under the same verdict. Where God's cause is at stake, only utter freedom and no coercion whatever will do. All pushing, all hustling and bustling, are a hindrance.

The warning not to root out the weeds has one more implication. We are warned not to presume knowing for sure who belongs to the community of Christ and who does not. Many a man who is firmly convinced of being a Christian, of living in faith and in fellowship with God, is in fact quite unconverted. Others who seem to be far from Christ are in reality very near him. Let us beware of judging! God alone knows our hearts. He alone knows whether your zeal for him is holy or unholy, whether the silence and hesitation of your neighbor is really unbelief and indifference against the gospel. Once the Lord opens the book of judgment and separates the sheep from the goats, great will be the amazement at the discovery of who is his and who is not! Let us beware lest we anticipate this judgment!

No wonder our parable closes with a reminder of the last judgment. The fulfillment is preceded by the judgment, the final separation. What role does the idea of judgment play in your faith? When we read the sayings and parables of our Lord, we are amazed at the utterly serious treatment of judgment. We all must at one time appear before the throne of judgment. God will then sort out, he will separate the wheat from the weeds. The wheat will be gathered into the barn, and the weeds will be burned in the furnace of fire. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father, but the others will weep and gnash their teeth. Thus speaks the Lord, whether we like it or not. And he explicitly adds, "He who has ears, let him hear." It is therefore necessary, even salutary, to think of the judgment. It would be wrong to discard it as a terrifying, horrible idea. To him who is at one with God's cause the idea of judgment brings not horror, but joy. For it signifies the end of the battle, the final breaking down of resistance. God's glory, his life, will shine at

last: Truth and untruth, inextricably bound together in this world, will be definitely separated.

And yet, does not the idea of judgment remain terrifying for us? What if we should not pass the decisive test of life and death? The New Testament has a clear answer to our anxious questioning: If you are one with Christ, the judgment will be merciful. What is wrong with you will be cast out, to be sure, but you yourself will be saved through him, your Strength. It is therefore all-important to be one with him so that nothing may pluck you out of his hand. Thinking of judgment is imperative; first, it makes us examine whether or not we bear fruit, tokens of our communion with him; secondly, we are increasingly driven confidently and obediently to follow him, who pardons all our sins and heals all our iniquities. Only the thought of judgment will show us how faith is really a matter of life or death. This knowledge is of first importance. For soon enough our faith will relapse and we become again lighthearted and indifferent, lame and lazy, wavering and discouraged. O man, awake! Life and death are at stake!

The entire life, the history of the whole world, has its beginnings, as its end, in God. We all come from God. We all have deserted him. The question is whether we are willing to be drawn again to God through Christ and to live with him the rest of our lives. This is the meaning of all events. This is the hidden significance, only slightly recognizable, of world history. God wishes to draw man to himself. The means he uses may seem too terrible to us to be employed by God. We understand no better. We continue to trust in our ability to keep apart the weeds from the wheat, to differentiate between God's action and that of the devil. We should not and cannot do this. It is God's concern. Our concern is to seize the outstretched hand, to accept the gift which he so richly bestows upon us, to guard and to keep the jewel he offers us, and to defend it against all attacks of the evil one. May we be found faithful in this task. Amen.



## *The Dishonest Steward*

LUKE 16:1-13

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence; for the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.

"He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

This parable is among the difficult ones in the Bible. It usually proves to be a stumbling block to the reader who is at a loss how to interpret it without help. This is not because the parable in itself is enigmatic, but because we stick to the letter instead of being guided by the Spirit of the Lord. In this as in other cases the letter kills, but the spirit kindles life. There are

today many Christians according to the letter who boast of their good discipleship and sheepishly cling to the Book; and yet they are wholly deprived of the mind of the Master they intend to follow. One person may harden his heart and prevent the blowing of the Spirit regardless of thorough biblical knowledge and belief. And another with very little knowledge of the Scriptures may be a true disciple of Jesus, for the Lord has won his heart and God's love is mightily at work in his life. The Bible is like a door to God. Doors are made to be opened; they serve as a passway, not as a barrier. The Bible is given to us not as an object of admiration, but that we may reach God and God may reach us through it. Frightfully enough, the Bible has all too often in the history of Christianity been misused to bar man's access to God. Let us ask our God to open up for us, today and forever, the Bible as a door to him so that we may be filled with the Holy Ghost.

A steward is the principal actor in this parable, as in others. Stewardship best characterizes man's relationship to God. Wholly dependent upon God, we are nevertheless called to responsible action. We possess nothing of ourselves. "What do you have which you have not received?" This word is indicative for our situation. It applies to the gifts of the body as well as to those of mind and soul, even to the benefits offered to us through the redemption in Jesus Christ. Everything is a gift; we are nowhere creators, but everywhere receivers. Still, God has endowed us with the ability to act responsibly. We are to decide, to determine, and thus we are responsible. The dual characteristics of our situation—our dependency and our responsibility—are sharply focused in this parable in which we are called stewards.

A steward must act himself; yet he must act in the best interest of his master. Whoever administers what he received from God, according to the will of the divine Giver, is a faithful or honest steward; whoever uses it according to his own will, his own advantage, his own glory, is a dishonest one. This and nothing else is at stake in the Bible. This and nothing else is the meaning of our lives. If we were faithful stewards, the world would be set aright. All evil and all iniquity stem from our unfaithful stewardship.

The parable is, at first hearing, disturbing insofar as a dishonest steward is described as an example to be imitated. Mind you, not because he was dishonest! This man is a robber, a liar, a crook on two accounts. First he has deceived his master for years. We are not told in what manner this happened. We only learn that he administered the rich man's goods to his own advantage and not to the master's. The rich man trusted him, and he shamefully misused this trust. But now the day of reckoning has come. He will lose his job, he will be driven from the house. Faced with this prospect, he resorts to a second fraud. On the last day of his right to sign legal contracts in his master's name, he changes the bills of the rich man's debtors to the disadvantage of his master and to the debtors' advantage. He proceeds not in the name of mercy, but solely by clever calculation of his own advantage. By thus reducing their bills, he hopes to bind the debtors to him in such a way that later on, when he has been discharged, they will receive him in their houses, and he will not be left in the street to beg or hire himself out. He is a crook throughout; there is no doubt about it. In what way, then, is he exemplary?

This is how: The steward accomplishes in his situation and with the means and the limited time at his disposal as much as he can from his point of view—once we accept his presuppositions. In so doing he is exemplary. His dishonest dealings are not exemplary at all. On the contrary, these are entirely abominable and must be condemned. But once his crooked behavior is taken for granted, his ability totally to accept his predicament and to act accordingly, with a view to the best results for his own future—this is exemplary, precisely for the disciples. Let us try to understand this a little better.

This man was a realist. Having no illusions, he dares to see things as they really are and then draws the necessary consequences. He acts determinedly, he loses no time, he does not hesitatingly glance to the right and to the left. He proceeds intelligently, as he must if he wants to achieve his purpose: to escape as easily as possible. This consistency, this bold determination which is entirely fitting to the task—these are praised by Jesus,



although the business in itself is utterly rotten. He might as well tell us churchly Christians: Take a look at the board meeting of a corporation. No hesitations here, no mere phrases, no distracting sentimental deliberations! Only ruthless decision-making in the interest of the firm, subject to greatest objectivity. If only you Christians acted likewise! Let me at this point add a word about the church. If a business were to be conducted as unobjectively, as unintelligently, as hesitatingly and with such lack of commitment, as the church deals with its own affairs, it would go bankrupt in no time. Nothing proves better that the church is God's concern and not man's than the continuous existence of the church up to this day, after nineteen hundred years of such incredible mismanagement and diletantism.

If the Christians spent half the energy on the affairs of the church as the secular people spend on their business, the world would be different. Or take the commitment of soldiers and officers in war time. War is frightening, inhuman, against the will of God. One thing, however, cannot be denied. War awakes an amazing commitment in people. If you Christian soldiers were to fight for God's cause with only half the determination as the soldiers fight for their worldly causes, things would be different.

This is what the Lord means by the example of the dishonest steward. He has the courage to be consistent; he dares and does everything in his power to assure his own future. And what do we do? What about our future? Our destiny? The eternal habitations, says the Lord. The Kingdom of God. As Christians we know that this is our destiny, our future. We move toward this goal. It is the final destination and hence the ultimate meaning and significance of our lives. Do you adjust your thoughts and deeds to this goal as determinedly and ruthlessly as this crook did? Do you employ the short time left before bankruptcy (i.e., before death), to be once received into the eternal habitations? The dishonest steward loses not one minute. He does precisely what serves his purpose, what assures him the future as he envisages it. How about you, dear friends, with regards to the great future and our preparations? Must you not admit before

God: Yes, Lord, the children of darkness are wiser than the children of light? The secular people, in their own way, are consistent. We are not. How seldom a believer happens to draw the consequences of his faith, his knowledge about the Kingdom of God, the eternal destiny of man, and to act accordingly! Let us consider the harsh question in all its implications: O man, knowing as you do Jesus Christ and the message of the Kingdom of God, do you live your life in all its aspects, big and small, according to this goal? Are you free to say: Examine me, O Lord, and you will find me living in all things as a disciple, entirely given to the goal of Christ? From morning till night I think and do only what befits a disciple in his pressing on toward this goal. O, avoid whatever might slow me down or weaken me. I do whatever strengthens and encourages me. All my thoughts and feelings are straining forward to seeking your Kingdom and its righteousness. My life is to trust you, my God, and to be thankful for the new life, for mercy, forgiveness, and redemption—all gifts of yours. Hence I love my fellowmen with your love and serve them in imitation of your exemplary service, O Jesus Christ. Like a competitor in the Olympic games during the training period subordinates everything to his goal, the winning of the gold medal, so also I condition everything in my own life to preparation for the eternal destiny and to your service. May you truly affirm all this?

Dear friends, as soon as we get home, let us take a sheet of paper and a pencil and examine our lives point by point, asking ourselves: Do I live, think, feel, and act as it must be expected from one who marches toward the eternal goal and is called a disciple of Christ? For the Lord has not given us this parable in vain. He wants us to examine ourselves and to practice increasing faithfulness to the heavenly calling which we have received through his mercy.

Is this not justification by works? I hear you raise this question. Are we not to be redeemed by faith alone, by the mercy of God in Jesus Christ through whom all our sins, including all unfaithfulness and dishonesty in our stewardship, are forgiven? The answer is: We are most certainly saved by his mercy alone. Chil-



dren of light we are called by our Savior. Our own efforts will never turn us into such children of light. These we are only and alone because God has called us into his light through Jesus Christ. He, and he alone, has redeemed us from the reign of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of light. On us—who are without him abandoned to the reign of darkness, to greed and selfishness, to hatred and quarrels, to stinginess and lust, to self-justification and pride, to worldliness and anxiety in the world, to trouble and pain, to suffering and insecurity, to all the ailments of this earth where war and injustice, inhumane treatment and lawbreaking, are the order of the day—on us he has bestowed a new gift, heavenly and eternal love, mercy, life everlasting. Not we ourselves have created the light. The opposite is true; we have turned the light into darkness; we have perverted his marvelous creation. Yet he has had mercy on us; he has set a new beginning. He has accepted us, the godless, again in his unspeakable loving kindness. He has called us, the rebels, his dear children and heirs, and he has clothed us with a new nature. Truly nothing allows us to boast: This I have achieved by myself. He alone has accomplished everything. As a rescue party, searching in the mountains for victims who have fallen into an abyss, reaches down to the completely exhausted people, carrying them back to the light of day, and bringing them safely home with infinite care—thus God in Jesus Christ has sent his rescue party to our salvation and brought us to his shelter called the church, the community of Jesus Christ. And here we are now and may rejoice in our salvation. Around his fire we sit, from his bread we eat, his love and forgiveness we experience, his spirit gives us new strength. In this way, and no other, we have become children of light—by mercy alone.

But presently, rescued and vivified, we must return to work. The Master entrusts us with new responsibilities. He puts us as workers in his vineyard. He charges us with the administration of his goods. Now, as children of light, we are to be the stewards of the tremendous riches we have received of his bounty. We may live from them yet they remain his possession, not ours. These children of light are expected to prove their worth, not to be out-



distanced, as far as resourceful action is concerned, by the children of darkness when they go about their worldly business. The Master of the house passes us in review, asking: Are you a faithful steward of the goods I gave you to administer? Do you rightly use the short remaining time to get ready for the eternal habitations which I have prepared for you? Do not think that this can be done in a superficial, general way. Life consists of small and great concerns, and both are inextricably bound together. He who is careless in little things is careless throughout. The little things will bespeak your faithfulness in the big ones, your seriousness about the new life, and your obedience to your merciful Lord.

Our Savior gives us still another example to put our conception of stewardship to the test: money. He numbers it among the small things. It is most certainly of little concern in comparison to the greatness which is contained in the words "Kingdom of God." Nevertheless it is no small matter for us. Money is the test case for the earnest of our faith. How do you deal with money? "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon"! The Lord calls it unrighteous because so much unrighteousness, so much injustice, sticks to it. The money which rules the world, as we know, is truly unrighteous mammon. At the mere mentioning of armament, stock market speculation, capital gains, bribery, high finance, a world of injustice and unrighteousness emerges. Money smells of blood. This is why it is unrighteous mammon. However the Lord does not continue: Therefore beware of it. He knows very well that money is part and parcel of this world in which we must exist. Rather, he says: Use this unrighteous mammon according to the way of the Kingdom so that there will be rejoicing in the eternal habitations, in heaven. Be as consistent, as determined, as objective, in your use of this mammon, as the dishonest steward was in his own manner.

What is meant by using mammon according to the way of the Kingdom? The Lord has again quite specific recommendations. You must be liberal in the use of money, must not have your heart set on it, not be anxious about it, but spend it as required by the future destiny, the eternal goal. The meaning of the Kingdom of God being fellowship, love, mutual assistance, even

your money ought to serve this purpose, ought to further fellowship, mutual assistance, love.

You might well object: Go tell this to those who have money, for I have none. Dear friends, this is not true. Perhaps you have not much of it, but this is entirely beside the point. Even with very little money at hand, one may be either a money-hoarder or a child of God. The widow's gift was a great contribution in the eyes of Jesus, for she gave good-naturedly from the little she possessed. Vacation time is about to start and we are ready to indulge in some extra pleasures. The Lord himself is pleased with these. He does not forbid recreation and relaxation. Watch out, however, lest you think only of yourselves. Others need vacations, too, but cannot afford them. Try to figure out how much you can put aside for them. The difference between the children of this world and the children of light is the following: A child of this world asks: What do I need? His needs will be such as to leave nothing for others. A child of light asks: What do the others need? He will ponder with how little he can manage so that there will be some left for others. No one should be pleased with his vacation unless he endeavored to spare something for others to enjoy their vacation.

Vacations, however, are not our main concern at this point. Money plays an important role throughout our life. It very often uncovers the shallowness of our faith. Don't argue: Why does he speak of money instead of things divine? The Lord Jesus himself ordained that we should not speak of things divine without speaking about money as well. For money, our relationship to the riches of this world, will tell whether or not we have a heart for our brother and consequently whether we take God seriously. This is why we hear it so often repeated: "Do not neglect to do good; God loves a cheerful giver." How much higher would the credit rating of Christianity be if in financial matters it had more readily acted according to the will of God and thereby shown that love of God equals love of neighbor. Let us take this to heart. Amen.

## *Two Parables About Prayer*

LUKE 11:5-13

And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

These two short parables—about the friend who gets up at night and about the father who fulfills his son's wish—intend to show us God as one who answers prayer and thus urgently encourages us to pray. Let us therefore try to understand together what prayer is or, in other words, what our right relationship to God should be. For as goes our relationship with God, so goes our prayer, and vice versa. May the Lord himself, through his Word, make us truly pray!

If the closing words of the parable are true, a great responsibility weighs upon us. If God really gives his Holy Spirit to those who ask him, help for the world is at hand. It only depends on you, on your willingness to grasp what God has already in store for you.

Hardly any listener in this room would deny that the world's most urgent need is a new Pentecost, a new outpouring of the



Holy Ghost. For the catastrophe draws nearer and nearer, threatening to devour us. As time goes on, chances for a human solution of the conflict are diminishing. Even statesmen have ventured this opinion and did not refrain from admitting their own impotence, saying: The one thing capable of saving us is a tremendous revival throughout the world. When the pastors are silent, statesmen must speak up. One event only would indeed make all the difference, a new, worldwide Pentecost. Some may ask: What can we contribute? Our answer is: You may indeed contribute a great deal, according to the promise: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" It is not God's fault if the Spirit fails you. Both things are true: God alone can help you, all salvation and redemption, all goodness, come from him alone: Yet as he has all this ready to give, it now is all-important for us to take hold of the gift offered. Suppose there is but one doctor in town at the outbreak of a dangerous disease; he possesses the necessary remedy and goes so far as to announce its distribution free of charge; he is certainly the only one in a position to help; undoubtedly each individual has to blame but himself if he is not helped. Each one must do his share; he must allow the potential helper actually to help him; he must go and get the remedy. Likewise God in Jesus Christ offers us salvation; he wants to give us his Holy Spirit through his Word. But now we must get hold of it ourselves, and this act is called prayer. This is why prayer is the most important thing we can do.

It is not particularly surprising if such an affirmation is met with suspicion. After all we have some experience. We have seen in our own lives and in those of others how often we pray without anything happening. Perhaps our childlike faith has been disappointed at being denied an answer to prayer. Or we are thinking of how during a war one side implored God to grant them victory while the enemy did precisely the same, causing the mockers to say: You greatly embarrass the good Lord; whose prayer is he to answer? We may also be reminded of those, very reluctant to help, who are nevertheless more than willing to pray for any cause. We

are indeed sorely tempted in such cases to consider prayer as a cheap substitute for action. Even prayer mills might be mentioned. They are not the exclusive property of the Lama priest in Tibet. They are found among us, too, albeit in somewhat different form. I have in mind the kind of litany where the amount of prayers offered and the number of people praying are thought capable of forcing an issue, as 5000 signatures will force a federal vote. Furthermore, we all remember many a prayer we have uttered ourselves where not only nothing happened, but we not even seriously expected something to happen. Finally, there are doubts of a principal nature. How am I to tell the good Lord, the all-knowing Father, what to do? How presumptuous to induce him to do something, he who does by his own volition what is good and necessary. Is it not a rather childish idea to assume that the all-powerful God, whose wisdom and hidden strength rule the world, should pay attention to the requests of Joe Smith on Main Street?

Once we are on this track, one thought leads to another: Granted God is almighty, but so is he hidden and incomprehensible. How could he otherwise let the world run its course? The idea of the heavenly Father watching over us as an earthly father watches over his children is thus more fitting for children than for thinking, mature people who have been exposed to human suffering and the revolting injustices of world history. With such thoughts in our hearts we cannot possibly pray. This explains why prayer is a closed door for so many people. What is the answer?

Such thoughts indicate to what extent prayer determines our faith. Tell me how you pray, and I will tell you what your faith is and who your God is. The God who in Jesus Christ makes his face shine upon us is a God who answers prayer. He is the Almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things. He is the all-knowing God who is aware of all your needs even before you ask him. He is the Lord who does everything according to his will, suffering no contradiction. His reign over the world is hidden and inaccessible to human understanding. Yet at the same time he has created us for fellowship with him; he not only speaks



to us, but wants us to speak with him. It is the mystery of his love that he, the Almighty, does not want to be alone, without us, his creatures; he who alone has eternal life wishes to make us partakers of his love and his life—if we are willing to pray for it. In his omnipotence he has ordered the dialogue between him and us. In his Son, he has revealed himself, he has told us his name, that of the Father to whom we may come and should come with all our troubles. It is the mystery of his omnipotence that he who knows everything and accomplishes everything nonetheless requests our prayers, and when we pray does what he would not do otherwise. And it is the mystery of his mercy that he honors us, the unworthy, encouraging us to come before him despite our unworthiness and listening to us as though he needed us. Even better, in his omnipotence he has decreed that he really needs us, because he so wills, because he desires true fellowship with us and is not bent on carrying out his plan without our participation. He could very well govern the world without the slightest consideration of our thoughts and wishes, but then he would have no fellowship with us and we would have none with him. Then we would not be his children, and he would not be our Father. Fate would be our god, and we would be robots, puppets, moving at his command. Then God would not be love, and we could not love him. But now he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as he really is, such as our parable shows him: the God who out of love answers prayer. This, you see, is the meaning of his revelation: God the Almighty shows himself as the one to whom we may and must and can pray. Our mind shall never perceive how it is possible for the Almighty to answer prayer. We are not even required to try, being unequal to the task. But we are asked to acknowledge and to experience him as this God.

But at this point we need to know what prayer is all about. The reservations about prayer mentioned earlier are not without foundation. What usually goes by the name of prayer is of little or no value. We are bound to be bitterly disappointed when we reflect as follows: All right, I shall for once try and see how effective prayer really is. I hear Christians talking about it a great deal. Tonight, I shall ask in prayer for this or that and then see



whether or not it will be granted. If it is not, the test has failed and I shall know where I stand. My good friends, I can predict you know right now how the experiment will turn out: absolutely negative. You might as well save the effort. Such prayers are void of Jesus' promise. These are the empty phrases of the Gentiles against which he warns us. What then is genuine prayer?

Prayer, first of all, requires our presence before God. Coming before him is the main thing, even in prayer. To pray means to enter God's sanctuary. Praise and adoration play not in vain such an important role in the Bible. How many of you know how to praise God? We have perhaps some idea of what it means to give thanks to him. To be grateful to God for various gifts, even grateful from the depth of our hearts, does not yet imply our coming before him; it is not yet praise.

We may best learn from the Psalms what praise of God is. To praise him means to re-present him and his mighty acts, we are taught there. You, O Lord, are the Almighty One, my Creator, my Master, my Judge; you have made manifest your will through your commandments; you have shown your unspeakable mercy in your Son. You, the Almighty, Sustainer of the world, know me by my name and care for me, your insignificant creature. You call me by my name as a father calls his son by his name, thus instituting him as his heir. This you have done for me in your reconciliation and redemption, as exemplified in baptism. This and much more we must tell God. "Remember Jesus Christ"—this is the best part of prayer. That God may make his face shine upon us, as we plead at the end of each service—this is the best thing ever to happen in prayer. "Lord, let thy face shine upon us, and we are saved," as the Psalter puts it. Where this happens, there we are present before God in prayer; there he is with us and we are with him—and this is more than any other help.

Praise quite naturally leads to thanksgiving. Who could trustfully approach God as a Friend and Father without recalling how God in reality proved to be his Friend and Father? "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins and heals all your iniquities, who saves your life from destruction and crowns you with mercy and lovingkindness." To

give thanks means to remember God's benefits. Only when we are thankful do we enter his gates, coming into his presence with that trust without which all our petitioning would be in vain. How can you implore God unless you are assured in your heart that he is your Friend? And how can you be assured in your heart without remembering his good deeds? Finally, how can you remember his good deeds without giving thanks?

Most people's prayers, you see, lack power and effectiveness because they forego both praise and thanksgiving. If we stop short of reaching his door, he does not hear us. Even then, of course, he knows what we think. He penetrates the last hiding places of our laziness. Because our hearts are far removed from him, however, he remains afar with his help. He can help and will help us only when we are truly concerned with him and intend not merely to use him to further our own ends. You get angry, don't you, and rightly so, when a neighbor approaches you with a friendly smile until he obtains what he came for and immediately turns his back on you; for he was not concerned with you, only with getting your help. God likewise becomes angry. If we come for the exclusive purpose of obtaining his help, he refuses to give it. We must come before him because of himself, in order to be with him, then he will help us. "Lord, let thy face shine and we shall be saved." As already mentioned, God in his omnipotence had decreed it possible for him, the Almighty, to answer prayer out of his desire to have fellowship with us. Fellowship with him is realized when he lets his face shine upon us so that we sense his presence and are surrounded and overwhelmed by his holiness and his love.

Have you ever experienced what marvelous secret lies hidden in the word of the Apostle: "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit"? To offer our heart with unveiled face to the glory of God in Jesus Christ—this is genuine prayer.

Only then do we know how to petition the Lord. Jesus tells in his parable of a visitor who dares knocking by night at his friend's door and continues his unscrupulous pounding until the friend

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opens. This is, of course, not an invitation to unscrupulous petitioning, nor does it imply that God is asleep, to be awakened only by our insistent knocking. Jesus simply encourages us to pray fervently and unceasingly. The length of our prayers is not decisive—or else we are like the Tibetans with their prayer mills grinding all day long. Decisive is only our insistence, and this equals our trust. Insistence may at times mean for us weak and superficial human beings long, even unceasing, prayer. It takes time to arrive at God's door. A friend may wonder about our motives if in a quick visit we communicate our desire for help and then vanish in the expectation of his prompt action. Occasionally, this may be the thing to do. As a rule, however, petitioning requires repeated appearances so that our friend will be convinced of our concern for his person and not only for his help. Our Lord does not in vain admonish us to ask, to seek, to knock. The three expressions are used to emphasize the importance of petitioning. I believe, nevertheless, that the more we praise and give thanks, the shorter may be our petitions. At any rate, the number of words does not count, only our faith in God's actual help. This is the mark of trust. When I petition a friend and tell him my needs, then I know for sure that he will help, if he is a true friend. He may not do exactly what I have asked for, but he will do what seems right and best to him. It is the same with God. Were God to grant our petitions to the letter, the outcome would often be disastrous. He often has to help us against our own wishes. Yet help he does—if only we have prayed confidently, if we have come before his door, if we have sought him and not merely his help.

What happens at such a moment? When we really reach God's door, when it is opened and God lets his face shine upon us—then our prayer for the Holy Spirit is already answered, or rather God has begun to answer it. It then happens that something of God himself, of his love, his strength, his power, and his wisdom, enters our life. The Holy Spirit is God's power and God's love taking its habitation in us. The results are, first, obedience and, secondly, peace and joy.

First, obedience. Genuine prayer proves itself in a new will to



obey God unconditionally and, along with this new will to obedience, in a new insight into God's will. While remaining imperfect as long as we live here on earth, both will nevertheless be a growing experience. Secondly, peace and joy. Whoever has found communion with God through prayer will be content and glad amidst the tempest of time and the sorrows of life.

Both are equally necessary today—obedient people and content and joyous ones. Should God decree after all a terrible time of judgment over us, with the foundations shaking and breaking apart, then only shall we discover those who have learned how to pray and, thanks to prayer, have firm ground under their feet. Should God, however, grant us once more a time of grace, then again it would be most important to have people around who have experienced Pentecost in the secret of their hearts and now, like Moses after his conversation with God, behold that glory which is a reflection of God himself, that love which is capable of drawing others to God, that peace of God which is beyond all understanding. Thus the great hope for the world is a worldwide Pentecost, a real awakening, issuing from God, throughout the nations. For this event we shall not cease to pray. Amen.

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